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BLACK-HOSS BEN; or, Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.

A TALE OF WILD RANCH LIFE.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "DESPARD, THE DUELIST," "ALWAYS ON HAND," ETC., ETC.



SEIZING THE FIERCE BRUTES BY THEIR COLLARS, HE LIFTED THEM BODILY AND HELD THEM FOR A MOMENT AT FULL ARM'S LENGTH, THEN CAST THEM FROM HIM

Black-Hoss Ben;

OR,

Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.

A Tale of Wild Ranch Life.

BY PHILLIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF THE "TIGER DICK" AND "PATENT-
LEATHER JOE" SERIES, "ALWAYS ON
HAND," "A HARD CROWD," "THE
GENTLEMAN FROM PIKE,"
"A MAN OF NERVE,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BLACK-HOSS BEN.

"If the lady will allow me."
"Thanks; I can do very well without assist-
ance."

"Beg pardon!"
High noon in the foot-hills country, with the
plains stretching away in the rear, and the
snow capped peaks piercing the heavens on
ahead.

A swaying stage-coach and chafing horses en-
veloped in a cloud of dust, before a wayside
inn, with an almond-eyed son of the Flowery
Kingdom on its veranda, drubbing a gong
lustily.

Having just leaped down from his seat beside
the driver, to open the coach door gallantly, a
"prince of the plains," dressed from head to
heel in buckskin—all save his broad-brimmed
slouch hat—and with a crimson sash knotted
about his waist, supporting a brace of highly-
finished revolvers and a formidable bowie. His
hair hung in graceful, wavy freedom to his
shoulders, while a drooping mustache heightened
the effect of his finely-chiseled features.

We have seen how ungraciously the lady pas-
senger declined his politeness.

She was tall, as became a goddess, with hair
like the raven's wing, skin of satin smoothness
and alabaster purity, lips that bespoke a pas-
sionate nature, and eyes—that no man ever for-
got!

Yet Black-Hoss Ben was nothing abashed by
this haughty beauty. He stepped back with a
knightly flourish of his chapeau, permitting her
to alight as she chose.

"Beatrice!" called a peevish voice from the
interior of the coach.

"Yes, papa," answered our heroine, in tones
of liquid music that thrilled through and
through the man she had just snubbed.

"Where is my hop pillow? Oh! here it is. I
hope this infernal journey is nearly at an end.
I've been shaken up and pounded until every
joint is like a rickety hinge, and every muscle
is a mere pulp! Take the pillow, will you? I
shall never have another night's sleep, either
with or without it."

As the invalid essayed to descend with the
assistance of his daughter, he stumbled, and
would have fallen but for the sustaining arm of
Black-Hoss Ben, who sprung to his aid with a
deprecating glance at the lady.

"Thank you!" she said, frostily.

John Holyoke, whose health and fortunes had
gone down together, looked at the young athlete,
rich in nature's heritage of youth, strength and
comeliness.

"What fools we are in Wall street," he said.
"Now, Erie never cost you a night's sleep, I'll
be bound, nor made you quarrel with your din-
ner."

"I reckon not, stranger," replied Black-Hoss
Ben, in his ringing, manly barytone—"nor
Tombstone either. Your money-grubber has
my sympathy; but none of it in mine, if you
please!"

Without pushing any further the attentions
evidently distasteful to the lady, he turned
away, to greet the landlord with a hearty slap
on the back, while he shook his hand with a grip
that made him wince.

"Hallo, old man! How's the leg now?"

"Let up, Ben! D'ye think I'm made of iron?
The hoss is all right, barrin' he's as full o' the
devil as his skin 'll hold. Ef you don't take
him out o' this purty soon, he'll kill off all my
hands!"

Ben laughed and blew a shrill whistle.

From the stables immediately came an up-
roar—a furious pounding and a torrent of pro-
fanity.

Then through the doorway leaped a steed as
black as night, with eyes of fire, nostrils the
tint of an ocean shell, and hide as sleek and
glossy as satin. No bit had ever chafed his
tender mouth, no saddle galled his withers.
His sweeping mane and tail flowed free in na-
ture's beauty, unclipped to suit the barbarous
conceits of flunkydome.

A hostler, tugging at the end of a broken hal-
ter-strap, was tumbled end over end, in the
acrobatic feat not down on any circus bill.

Then, with a neigh of glad recognition, the
magnificent stallion cleared with giant bounds
the intervening space to his master's side.

John Holyoke, who in his palmy days had
drawn the ribbons over the back of his own

horse with a record in the teens, stopped on the
inn veranda.

"Look! look, Beta! Was there ever so per-
fect a piece of horse-flesh? What nostrils; what
an eye; what active ears! A chest that would
blow a church organ! And perfect quarters!
See the set of that tail! He looks like an
Arabian."

But Beatrice's educated eye had run over the
points more rapidly than her father could indi-
cate them. She was fascinated.

The next instant she saw the mutual love of
horse and master; and it made her heart glow
with involuntary gratitude toward Black-Hoss
Ben.

The horse thrust his muzzle against his mas-
ter's neck, nibbling it affectionately; the man
received the shapely equine head into his arms,
patting and stroking the sleek, arched neck,
while he cried:

"Ah, sweetheart!—my beautiful Black Dia-
mond! Have they done the square thing by
you while I was away? Hampered you with a
halter—the beggars! Well, this civilization is a
dirty business!"

And stripping off the reprobated head-stall,
he flung it aside in strong disgust, to the evi-
dent satisfaction of the horse, who tossed his
head with a snort of proud disdain.

"And now for that shank."

As if fully comprehending, the horse held up
his fore leg for inspection, resting the hoof
lightly on his master's knee.

The shank was duly stroked and patted with
approval.

"As sound as a dollar!"

Then with a bound Black-Hoss Ben vaulted
upon the bare back. A yell, and they were off
like a rocket.

Guiding the intelligent animal entirely with
voice and knees, the rider put him through his
paces, watching the now perfect action of the
recently-injured limb. All their movements
were perfectly co-ordinated. Horse and man
merged into a centaur, reveling in this helter-
skelter play.

Presently they swept down upon the horses
being removed from the coach, as if they
meant to ride them down.

Then followed a snorting and prancing, and
wrathful profanity on the part of the struggling
hostlers. Black Diamond shot into the air,
sailing like a bird over the backs of the restless
coach-horses.

"Good Heavens, what a leap!" cried Mr.
Holyoke, who had watched the display with
breathless enthusiasm.

Beatrice's heart stood still, and the blood re-
ceded from her lips.

The next instant Black Diamond stood reared
on his hind legs, pawing the air and snorting
with eyes rolling like globes of fire, while his
master fired a rapid succession of pistol shots
into the air from a revolver in either hand.

As the horse dropped back to all-fours, the
rider lifted his hat, with his bold, laughing eyes
fixed full upon the face of the girl who had
been betrayed into forgetfulness of her hau-
teur.

She flushed hotly, vexed at herself and at
him, and drew her father by the arm.

"Come! let us go in. Our dinner will be
cold," she said.

"Yes," sighed her father, gloomily, "we
may as well go in. A man without money
in his pocket has no business with blooded
horses."

From her place at the dinner-table, Beatrice
saw Black-Hoss Ben plunge his head into the
horse-trough and, having drawn it forth drip-
ping, wring the water out of his long hair, and
finish his toilet with a vigorous rubbing of face,
head and neck with a coarse towel, and a few
careless draws of a comb through his hair.

This certainly was not a gentleman, as she
had been taught to understand the term; and
yet here was a manly vigor to which her wo-
man's heart could not be insensible.

A moment later he took his place opposite
them at the table.

"That is a magnificent animal you have,"
said the invalid.

"Well," said Black-Hoss Ben, with the look of
affectionate pride with which he always spoke
of his horse, "I reckon they don't put 'em to-
gether much to beat Black Diamond."

"He must have cost you a pretty figure."

"Cost me?" with a chuckle of amused recol-
lection. "He nearly cost me a broken neck!"

But then he saved my bacon a great many times
since; so I allow he'd have the better of me, if
we were to square accounts. He was the king
of the herd, and for six weeks never let me see
anything but his heels. But at last I snared him
at a drinking-place. I'll never forget the next
half-day. I thought he'd kill me; and he didn't
come far from it, and himself in the bargain. If
he had only known how close it was to a drawn
battle, I reckon he wouldn't have given in
when he did."

"I suppose, now, it would take something of
a consideration to induce you to part with the
horse?"

"Well, stranger, I hardly know how to put it.
Let's see—that fellow, Vanderbilt—a hundred
millions, is it?—and Gould and Astor as many

more. Well, if they were to pool their piles, I
wouldn't clip Black Diamond's tail for the pot.
Why," he went on with a glow of feeling, "he's
my—my *pardner*!—the old man that never
goes back on me. Do you think, then, that I
would break faith with him? It's understood
between us that he shall never submit his back
to the burden of any living man but his *pard-
ner*."

But, his dinner disposed of, the invalid's mind
reverted to the painful journey he must now
resume.

"How much more of this infernal clatter and
bang and jounce and pound must I endure,
before reaching Robert Dukes's ranch?" he
asked.

Black-Hoss Ben looked up with a start.

"What!" he cried—"you are not bound for
Demon Dukes's?"

From the father, his glance quickly turned to
the daughter.

The flash of haughty surprise and inquiry
from her eyes recalled him to himself.

"Beg pardon!" he said, apologetically. "We
have a rough way of tacking handles to one an-
other, out here. But it don't count. One's
pet name for one's *pardner* isn't always the
most complimentary."

Then turning to the father, he answered his
question.

But his manner had undergone a subtle
change.

"Demon" Dukes! What did it mean? In spite
of her family loyalty, a sense of vague forebod-
ing crept over Beatrice. She had never seen
this relative, whose hospitality her father was
seeking in the hope of repairing his shattered
health; nor, indeed, did she know anything
very definite about him—only that he had gone,
a young man, to push his fortunes in the West,
and was now a large cattle-herder. But it had
never occurred to her that he might prove ma-
terially different from her father.

When the coach, now occupied by only herself
and father, and a man whom they had picked
up at Santa Fe, and whose unbroken silence had
thrown around him an air of mystery, if not
suspicion—when the coach, thus tenanted,
rolled away, leaving Black-Hoss Ben on the
tavern veranda, she became conscious of a feel-
ing of loneliness and insecurity.

Black-Hoss Ben gazed after the receding
coach wistfully. As it disappeared, an unex-
pected sigh recalled him to himself with a start,
when he resumed his happy-go-lucky air as
long as he was about the tavern. But when he
was alone in the mountain road, out of sight
and hearing behind the coach, his air of sober-
ness returned.

"A man covered with crime!" he said to him-
self—"whom she would shrink from, if she
knew. I wonder if it is some subtle woman's
instinct warning her that I am no fit associate
for pure womanhood? *Tiger Dick*! The very
name would blanch her cheek."

He was silent for a long time, after that, his
abstraction deepening, his face saddening. He
was heedless of the restive movements of his
horse, who fretted at the enforced slowness of
the walk at which he had put him.

"And yet men have reformed," he went on,
finally breaking silence. "Why not I? What
a bid for virtue!"

He roused as if stimulated by the thought.

"If I could win her, the wide world would
hold no temptation to draw me away from the
path she too might walk in!"

He put his horse into a gallop. His eyes
were aglow. His breath came in deep, strong
inhalations.

"I'll do it!—by Heaven, I'll do it!" he cried,
at last.

Leaping down from his horse, he knelt down
in the road, and with one hand on his heart
and one raised to heaven, vowed, in deep, son-
orous tones:

"Hear me, Heaven! If I win her love, I
swear to reclaim the past and live a new life!
As I deal by her, so may the Great Judge hold
me to account in the day of reckoning!"

And his horse gazed at him wonderingly.

Meanwhile, throughout the afternoon the
coach labored up steep grades, along narrow
ledges, and through tortuous defiles, until at
nightfall they were in the very heart of the
wildest country Beatrice had ever seen.

As if to add the element of terror to their
discomfort, a thunder-storm broke over the
mountains. The driver swore; the horses were
unmanageable; and it was impossible to avoid
the water-filled ruts into which the wheels every
now and then sunk, threatening to overturn
the vehicle, if not send it crashing over some
precipice.

In the midst of all this, a pistol-shot rung
out, sharply distinct from the roaring thunder,
and the coach was brought up with an abrupt-
ness that threw the passengers from their seats.

A wild plunging of the horses, a Babel of
gruff voices; and as Mr. Holyoke prepared to
look out of the window, he was confronted by a
masked man on horseback.

"Great heavens! we are attacked by road-
agents!"

A dark lantern was flashed into the coach,
its light discovering Beatrice clinging to her

father's arm, yet as if drawing him back from danger, rather than seeking protection.

There was no woman's weakness, no hysterical terror and fainting. She sat defiantly erect, with compressed lips and flashing eyes. Her true metal was manifest. Black-Hoss Ben would have been delighted to see it.

John Holyoke was no coward. A man of the East, where weapons are the exception, it had not occurred to him to arm himself in keeping with his changed surroundings. Yet he faced the unaccustomed danger without flinching.

But the masked road-agent's gaze turned from these to the third occupant of the stage.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, in a tone of satisfaction, as if he had found what he sought.

But, so closely following as almost to blend with his ejaculation, a pistol exploded with deafening force in the confined space, filling the coach with powder smoke.

The silent stranger had got in the first shot of a desperate resistance.

CHAPTER II.

YELLOW JACK.

With a sharp cry of pain and rage the bandit dropped his dark-lantern, leaving the interior of the coach in darkness.

By the light of the stage lamp, his horse was seen to rear and paw the air, pivoting on his hind legs and snorting with terror, while the rider was fully occupied in the effort to keep his saddle.

Then the coach-door was thrown open with a bang, and the dark body of the silent stranger shot through it into the open air.

Now rose an uproar of oaths, yells, pistol-shots, and the clatter of iron-bound hoofs. The stage-horses plunged, swaying the coach until it seemed as if it must be overturned, or have its wheels wrenched from under it.

Amid all, the crash of glass and riving of wood showed that an indiscriminate fire had been opened on the coach by some of the road-agents, while others pursued the desperate stranger.

With a violence necessitated by the emergency, which left no time for parley, John Holyoke had fairly thrown his daughter on the bottom of the coach, and dropped beside her, holding her down while he cried:

"Do not attempt to rise! This is safest. The bullets may all fly over us. We can do nothing."

But Beatrice, who had once narrowly escaped death in a runaway, was keenly alive to another danger.

"The horses are unmanageable!" she cried. "We shall be dashed to pieces on the rocks! We may be able to leap out before they set off."

"No! no!" urged her father. "Lie still! It would be certain death to be seen trying to escape now. The men are bent on avenging their leader. I hope that plucky fellow put him out of the way of further devilry."

So they waited in terrible suspense, momentarily expecting that plunge forward which would announce that they were tearing along the mountain road, with on one side the danger of cruel mangle, if not instant death, by collision with some obstructing crag, and, on the other, the nameless horror of a leap into impalpable space over a precipice.

They did not know that one leader had been shot dead in his tracks, and the other had broken away, while a bandit held each wheel-horse by the bit, seconding the driver's efforts to pacify them. Nor did they know—and it was well!—the terrible revenge the infuriated road-agents were wreaking on the man who had had the temerity to attempt the life of their leader in the face of such hopeless odds.

Leaping from the coach, he had hardly struck the ground when his body became a target for their bullets. He made a desperate rush for the rocks and undergrowth which, once gained, would have afforded him a perfect shelter in such a night.

But the space between coach and cover was lighted by the lamp on that side, so that his body was clearly distinguishable; and before he had crossed it his back was fairly riddled with bullets.

With a shuddering cry, he sunk to his knees; then essayed to rise; staggered a step or two, and again fell—this time with his face in the mud.

A furious, demoniac yell of triumph arose from the bandits, as they rushed toward him.

Their victim, rallying, struggled to his elbow, and glared at them with blood-shot eyes. The side of his face which had not been pressed into the mud was ghastly. Its expression was not that of fear, but of consciously impotent rage and hate, and reckless defiance.

The leader of the road-agents, having gained control of his affrighted horse, had wheeled him clear round, and was in advance of the others.

"Back, men!" he commanded. "This hyar is my funeral!"

He did not notice how grimly the common slang figure fitted the murderous situation.

The prostrate man fixed his fast-glazing eyes on this furious foe.

"Yellow Jack, I know you," he uttered, huskily; for his tongue already felt the approaching paralysis of death. "Take this, with my parting curse!"

He fired his revolver; but his brain was reeling, his hand refused obedience to his will, and the bullet flew wide. His palsied arm sunk to the ground; his jaw dropped; and he remained like a groggy pugilist, balancing unsteadily on his elbow, and helplessly staring at the approaching blow that was to dash him to death.

At the flash of his revolver, Yellow Jack curbed his horse sharply, causing him to rear so as to completely shield his master's body from the threatened shot. Then the spirited animal felt the spur.

He knew the significance of this maneuver. The human devil who ruled him had trained him to do his hellish will.

Another horse would have leaped clear of the prostrate man. This one vaulted into the air, and came down with both fore feet on the breast of his victim, crushing in the thorax like an egg-shell. After that there was a slight spasmodic shuddering and twitching of the muscles, but no other motion.

Still the fiendish malignity of the murderer was not sated. Again and yet again he wheeled his horse, lifted him with bit and spur, and hurled him upon the mangled corpse, until it was fairly beaten to a pulp, and hoofs, pasterns and fetlocks of the irresponsible instrument of his vengeance reeked with blood.

His conscienceless followers sickened and shrank shuddering from the sight.

At last, as if even brute nature could endure no more, his horse rebelled, and with his fore legs planted rigidly, his hind legs drawn under his body, his tail hugged close, his head thrust forward, his ears laid flat, his eyes glaring, his nostrils pinched and his lips drawn back from his teeth, refused to approach the thing again!

It is impossible to tell what would have been the issue of this new antagonism—for the man was devil enough to kill the horse that revolted before his lust for blood was appeased—had not one of his subordinates, bolder than the rest, interposed.

"Jack! Jack! for God's sake, let up!" he cried, in horrified tones.

"Curse you! how dare you blow my name?" hissed the demoniac leader.

He did not attempt to draw a weapon, though it seemed as if it were in his heart to swoop upon and annihilate his incautious satellite. Perhaps it was lucky for him that he refrained; for a deadly menace might have brought upon him swiftly-interposing death. The man who dared cry halt to his rage in mid-career was no coward, and would not stand to have his skin perforated.

"Mistakes will happen, Cap," he said, apologetically. "But human natur' won't stan' everythin'. What kin ye expect, when even hoss natur' kicks? Remember, somebody's got to git the money off o' that stiff. Stiff!—it's more like pudd'n!"

"Waal, git the money off of it, then," growled the leader. "I reckon he's safe not to give ye no back-talk. I allowed to take all the kick out of him, anyway. Curse him! I've been savin' up fur him 'way back! an' now I've put in my work whar it'll count."

The completeness of his revenge, now that he was cool enough to look at it, seemed to afford him marked satisfaction, inasmuch that it quite restored him to good-humor.

"Come! let's see what else they've got in this old rattle-trap."

While the dark-lantern was being recovered, he drew close up beside the coach, and peered into the dimly-illuminated interior.

No longer in danger of pistol-shots, Beatrice and her father had regained their seat, the latter holding his daughter's hand. If he lacked the ability, he still had the instinct to protect her.

"Only a petticoat and a broken-winded old subject for the undertaker!" growled the outlaw, without ill-temper. "Johnny," to the driver, "what in thunder do you mean by haulin' this empty herrin'-box around the country?"

"Boss, you takes 'em as ye finds 'em," replied the stage-driver. "Ef she don't suit, ye goes to head-quarters. I reckon they'll accommodate ye with anythin' in reason."

"Johnny, you're too cunnin'. Look out you don't catch cold in that mouth o' yours."

The dark-lantern was now passed, and flashing it over the interior of the coach, the outlaw chief demanded:—

"Whar's yer express?"

"Nary express, boss."

"And that's all the mail you've brought?"

"That's the pile."

"Waal, let's have it out. A pack of rubbish, I'll swear!"

And his worst prognostic was realized, their search being rewarded for the most part with newspapers, and such letters as there were yielding nothing of material value.

As some vent for their disappointment, they tossed bags and all into the mud.

Thereupon the leader turned from the inanimate to the living freight.

"Waal, old wheezer," he said, "we'll have to call your pile. This promises to be mighty slim pickin's. Come! shell out—an' no back-talk."

There was no help for it. Mr. Holyoke handed over his watch and pocket-book, while a small sachet at his feet was being rifled.

"I hope some day to assist at your hanging, my fine fellow," he said.

The road-agent laughed.

"No malice, old bone-yard. You'd better give yer hull attention to poultices an' gruel, an' leave hangin' matches fur men that's stronger on their pins. Hallo, thar, Sam! don't tumble them woman-fixin's into the wet. Hang it, man! them frills an' furbelows won't never git ironed ag'in, in that kind o' style, this side o' Frisco."

And by the sound at the back of the coach, Beatrice knew that their trunks had not escaped the general spoliation.

"Now, miss," pursued the road-agent, "I'll have to trouble you fur that sparkler you had on yer finger when I fust looked in on ye. Sorry to trouble ye; but biz is biz."

"That was my dead mother's wedding ring," said Beatrice. "Are you so rapacious that you cannot leave me such a memento?"

"I'd like to humor ye, ma'am—dogged ef I wouldn't. But bein's as that's worth more'n all the rest o' the plunder I reckon the boys 'ud squeal ef I didn't levy on it. Eh, boys?"

The men were not slow in repudiating all sentiment.

"Ye hyear, miss?"

"I will send you twice the value of the ring, in any way you elect," urged Beatrice. "This is my only souvenir."

"A bird in the hand," quoted the outlaw. "An' givin' addresses is resky biz. Come! plank the sparkler!"

"You cowardly ruffians!" cried the girl, angrily. "If I had a weapon, I would defy the whole of you!"

"Hard names break no bones," laughed the robber; "an' I like yer spunk—I do, so help me, Bob!"

Beatrice was about to yield up the jewel, when all were startled by the crack of a pistol.

"Good God! I'm a dead man!" groaned one of the road-agents, as he reeled and toppled head-long from his saddle.

Then came a rush like the swoop of a whirlwind—a ringing clatter of hoofs that swept into their very midst, and stopped as abruptly as if it had brought up against the face of a cliff, to be transmuted into the rattle of fire-arms.

Beatrice saw a horse, free alike from saddle and bridle, with his fore legs thrust straight before him like columns of iron, and his hocks nearly touching the ground; and on his back a rider, who having sustained this instantaneous halt as if he were a part of the animal, was blazing away to right and left, from a revolver in either hand.

She heard yells of dismay, and groans of anguish from the lips of the bandits—saw horses plunging in mad confusion, some of them riderless; and then the whole stampeded down the mountain road, followed by Black Diamond, with his master riding like a god!

But the coach horses, too, had caught the frenzy of the moment, and, as was natural, were drawn along with their kind.

The driver, recognizing Black-Hoss Ben, had seconded him with right good will, and had paid for his part in the "leetle circus," by being shot from his box.

So now, unrestrained, the coach-horses tore through the night, left behind by their unhampered fellows, yet attaining a terrific pace.

The occupants of the swaying vehicle clung to each other, awaiting the final crash in breathless suspense.

CHAPTER III.

A COOL RECEPTION.

THE rout of the road-agents was complete. Those who were not killed outright, or wounded so that they were glad to escape Judge Lynch by creeping away in the bushes, taking their chances of death by bleeding, fever or starvation, were driven before Black-Hoss Ben, to scatter down bridle-paths like gophers scampering into their holes.

But the coach and its precious freight claimed attention; and Black-Hoss Ben desisted from further pursuit, drew to the side of the road, and when the runaways came up, put Black Diamond flank to flank with them, leaped to his feet on the animal's back like a circus-rider, and thence to the back of the nearer coach-horse, alighting astride.

A moment later they stood in a lather of sweat, quivering in every muscle and panting and sneezing with exhaustion; while, reins in hand, he presented himself at the coach-door, to find the passengers alive and eager to escape from what had so nearly proved a death-trap. But he restrained them, assuring them that the danger was over, and that he would assume the post of driver to the next station.

Although, in contrast with her father's hearty expression of thanks, Beatrice's acknowledg-

ments were formal almost to ungraciousness, Black-Hoss Ben seemed satisfied.

"But what good fortune brought you after us?" asked Mr. Holyoke. "I thought we had parted with you for good."

"Oh, no!" replied Ben, with a matter-of-course air. "I am on my way to Duke's place. I expected to overtake and pass you; but after this brush I'll keep you company, if agreeable to you."

"Certainly—certainly; much obliged, I'm sure!" stammered John Holyoke.

He had a confused sense that it was odd that the young man had not mentioned the fact of their common destination when the matter came up at the tavern table.

Beatrice felt annoyed. Was this man, whom from the first she had sought to keep at a distance, following her?

Truth to tell, he was—partly to protect her; partly, perhaps, for a more selfish reason.

It was near midnight when they reached the next baiting place, and here Beatrice found that irrepressible Black-Hoss Ben pursued her even into dreamland!

The next morning he was on hand with his pleasant smile.

"You will find it much more comfortable to make the rest of the way on horseback," he said to Mr. Holyoke. "And with your permission and that of your daughter"—bowing to her, with a look which showed that he was thinking rather quizzically of her past reception of his attentions—"it will be a pleasure to constitute myself your guide. Luckily, I have found a couple of horses that will just suit you—one a filly, with a cradling canter that will not tax your strength so much as the jolt of a coach; the other a more spirited horse, yet perfectly safe and sure-footed. But, unluckily, we are put to it for a lady's saddle."

He turned his eyes upon Beatrice's face, and went on:

"Somehow, I fancied that Miss Holyoke could ride bareback, or, at any rate, with only a surcingle."

She flushed. Her father spared her the necessity of replying.

"You should see her ride!" he cried—"you who know what riding is."

Black-Hoss Ben's face did not hide the pleasure he felt, and he had the audacity to answer, still looking at Beatrice:

"It is the one thing I have wished to see."

Then, thinking it about time to leave off talking about the lady before her face, he addressed her directly:

"Horse-lovers have a freemasonry by which they recognize each other at sight; and by these mystic signs you have told me that you will find it hard to deny yourself—and me—this pleasure."

"Why should I wish to?"

There was a just-perceptible ring of defiance in her voice.

"I am obliged to you for securing me what will be a pleasure indeed. Knowing that horses are so plenty here in the West, I have brought a habit in my trunk, and my saddle has gone ahead of us by express. But I can do almost as well with a surcingle."

An hour later she stood waiting, with the fine black fabric of her riding-habit clinging close to her figure.

Black-Hoss Ben's eyes flashed over the flowing outlines.

Never before had he seen such symmetry of form combined with such grace of movement. In that moment he resolved to find a worthy mate to Black Diamond, and train it for her use.

The horse that she was to ride was led forward by Black-Hoss Ben himself. He was so engrossed by her goddess-like beauty, that for the first time since their association he forgot Black Diamond, and passed directly before him without noticing him.

There is no sentiment which the higher animals share with humanity more marked than jealousy.

With a shrill cry of rage, Black Diamond laid back his ears, bared his teeth, and plunged savagely at what he supposed to be a successful rival in his master's affections.

In recoiling from this fierce assault, the led horse drove a calk of his fore foot into the corner of his hind foot, and thus in a twinkling was unfitted for use.

Though the act was the result of his own thoughtlessness, which in turn was the outgrowth of the love that had suddenly enveloped him like a flame, Black-Hoss Ben knew that it would not do to pass over anything like viciousness in his "pardner."

Catching a whip from the hands of a hostler standing near, he cracked it so skillfully that the tip end of its lash left on Black Diamond's muzzle a sensation not unlike that excited by the "business end" of a bumble bee.

This was as severe punishment as he could bring himself to inflict on his favorite. Indeed it was sufficient for the spirited and intelligent animal. He leaped back, and then stood regarding his master in astonishment, yet evidently understanding the cause of his displeasure.

Black-Hoss Ben called him sternly. It was a beautiful sight to see him advance obediently, yet keeping a vigilant eye on the whip.

His master did not let him come quite up to him, but commanded him to halt at two paces' distance. He then led the supposed rival directly before him several times.

Although the led horse manifested some apprehension, Black Diamond stood perfectly quiet, his proud head lowered, showing humiliation and submissiveness as plainly as a human being could have done.

Giving the limping animal in charge of a hostler, Black-Hoss Ben now stood perfectly still, looking steadily at the offender.

Black Diamond pricked his ears forward, tossed his head gently two or three times, snuffing the air in the direction of his master, and then step by step slowly advanced, until he could thrust his muzzle against the side of his neck and nibble it caressingly, with a low whinny. Ben stroked his neck and called him "old pard."

The effect on the animal was magical. Joy flashed from his rolling eye; and every movement was instinct with glad affection.

Beatrice, who loved horses, felt her heart swell as it took in this noblest of his kind. But, ah! was there not danger that Black Diamond's master would slip in beside his "old pard?"

He approached her with his horse at his heels.

"You see that I am accountable for the disabling of your horse," he said; "but if you will honor me and my horse by accepting him as a substitute, you will enable me to make amends in a way which, I confess, will be not far from a bribe to repeat the offense."

"Oh, no, no! I could not think of disposing of you!" she cried, shrinking back and flaming scarlet. "Indeed, my ride is of no consequence. And then, any other horse will do as well. I see that there are several."

"There is not one in the lot that I would dream of asking or even permitting you to ride."

"But Black Diamond, being unfamiliar with a bridle, would be restive, and would be likely to develop traits—"

"Excuse me! But if there was a possibility—the remotest—of danger to you, do you suppose I would expose you to it?"

There was an intensity in his voice as he asked this question, that fairly took her breath away.

"Oh, no—of course not," she stammered, blushing divinely—"if you thought—"

"Pardon me once more! If I interrupt you, believe me it is from no lack of respect. But your imagination carries you so far from the truth. I know my horse! Besides, I did not purpose that you should use a bridle."

"Ride without a bridle!"

"Certainly. If I do, why should not you?"

Her father, from trying his filly, evidently to his delight, now rode up to inquire:

"What is all this discussion about? Why aren't we getting on?"

"My horse has been crippled by an accident; and we shall have to give up our ride for today," Beatrice hastened to answer, knowing the advantage of getting in the first word.

"Nonsense!" said her father. "I have quite set my heart on it. What! return to that crazy ark, after rocking in this cradle? Every nerve in my body is a capitalized NO, with three exclamations points after it. Get another horse, my dear. I am sure there are enough to choose from."

"But Mr.—"

"Hamilton."

"Mr. Hamilton says that none of them are suitable."

"In consequence of which, I have placed Black Diamond at Miss Holyoke's disposal, reserving for myself a horse in every way serviceable, but unsafe for a lady. If you will come to my support with your parental authority, you will save me from ignominious defeat, and secure your own pleasure."

"Well, I declare! What can you want handsomer than that?"

"But to ride a horse without a bridle!" cried Beatrice, in despair.

"Eh?" ejaculated her father, to whom such a proposition was a little startling.

"A horse for whose perfect training I vouch," urged Black-Hoss Ben.

"And have demonstrated," admitted Mr. Holyoke. "But, then, everybody isn't a Black-Hoss Ben, you know."

"Nor is there any need of being. If Miss Holyoke will but try, I will guarantee to prove her perfect competence in five minutes."

"Well, I can't see any exception to be taken to that. Beta knows how to ride—you may count upon that. Come! come, my dear! I have no doubt that you can do it."

There really seemed no way out of the matter short of an unreasonable and ungracious refusal; so Beatrice yielded, thinking to herself:

"For this once!"

"Let us begin by a formal introduction," said Black-Hoss Ben, taking her hand, and placing it on the sensitive muzzle.

"Old pard," he said, "this is your new mis-

tress. Now look to it that you don't discredit my recommendation."

The horse nibbled caressingly at the rose-leaf hand, regarding its owner in a most friendly fashion.

Beatrice was charmed.

"Oh, you beautiful creature!" she cried fondling the shapely head.

Then, resting his hand on his knee, Black-Hoss Ben received into his palm a high-arched and daintily-booted foot that a duchess might have envied. He scarcely felt her weight, as she sprung lightly to her seat.

He then instructed her in the management of the horse, which was really quite simple.

Her quick intelligence apprehended every thing at once; and her confidence was instantaneous.

The horse manifested pride in his graceful rider, and a gentleness which showed that he discriminated between her woman's weakness and his master's strength.

In this new mode of riding Beatrice experienced a keen zest which flashed from her eyes, glowed in her cheeks, and parted her lips. Never had she appeared to such advantage as now.

So they rode away, until they came to a mid-mountain ranch, built on an extended plateau—an adobe house, surrounded by cattle corrals fenced in with huge stakes driven into the ground.

A peon lad lay asleep in the shadow of the wall.

The master—Demon Dukes in person—came forth to receive them.

At his heels followed two huge bloodhounds.

Demon Dukes's six feet of stature consisted of a powerful bony structure sheathed in muscles of iron. His features were strongly marked, and his complexion—so much of it as was not hidden by a heavy black beard that spread over his breast to his waist—was almost as dark as the peon lad's. This heightened the effect of his peculiar penetrating stare.

A broad-brimmed slouch hat of gray felt, a red flannel shirt open at the breast, and blue Kentucky jean overalls tucked into the tops of heavy cowhide boots and supported at the waist by a broad leathern belt, made up his costume; while two revolvers of the largest size, a huge bowie (thrust into his boot leg), and a heavy teamster's whip of the kind called "black snake" constituted his armament.

This whip he always carried; and by his manner of handling it those who feared him learned to gauge his humor. When he was angry, he lashed the ground with it, making its ringing snap heard as far as a pistol-shot. When in particularly good spirits, he flourished it about his head, its cracker describing a most intricate course through the air, and snapping at rhythmic intervals, like castanets.

This was his especial instrument of cruelty. With it he could inflict wanton pain without endangering life, as the dumb brutes and equally helpless peons about him had frequent cause to know. They feared his sportive mood almost as much as his devilish rage.

Such was the man who appeared at the doorway, flanked on either side by a sullen-eyed bloodhound.

Thirty years had changed him so that John Holyoke did not recognize him.

"This is Robert Dukes's ranch, is it not?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"Waal, what of it is?" was the inhospitable retort.

"Might I see him?"

"I'm yer man. What d'ye want?"

"What! Robert? Is it possible? And I must be greatly changed too; for you don't appear to recognize me. I should not have believed that we could so soon grow out of each other's recollection."

"Who do you claim to be?"

"John Holyoke—your brother."

"H'm! What has brought ye out hyar?"

It was plain that Demon Dukes was not ready to fall on his brother's neck and weep for joy.

John Holyoke took fire at his ungracious reception.

"Is this the only welcome you have for me?"

"Waal," was the indifferent reply, "I don't see why I should give you a better. I'm a man of my word. I always say what I mean, and mean what I say. I don't claim to be overly glad to see you."

"Then you owe me nothing?" cried Mr. Holyoke, his brows knitting and his voice quivering with kindling indignation.

Demon Dukes shrugged his shoulders with a sardonic smile, and raising his whip, stung the ground with the tip of its lash.

The bloodhounds uttered an ominous growl in unison, and dropping their heads lower, glared suspiciously at the travelers from under their heavy eyelids.

"Take it coolly, Jack!" said his half-brother, tauntingly. "I'd know ye fur yerself by your infernal temper, when all other signs failed. As for owing you anything, I consider that I repaid the sop you threw to an unlucky dog, by taking myself out of the way and sparing your cur'd aristocratic pride. Do you still grudge

me the handful of filthy coppers out of your millions! If you do, I'll chuck 'em back at you, and kick you out as you did me. Thar can't be anything squarer than that."

"Papa! papa! let us go away from here!" cried Beatrice, plucking him by the sleeve.

Her eyes blazed as they rested on her uncle; and in her fair cheeks glowed twin spots of crimson.

Her voice brought her parent to himself, and checked the angry retort that trembled on his lips. He remembered his helplessness, with her dependent upon him; and his just indignation gave place to sudden, pitiable humility.

"Hush, Beta, hush!" he said, brokenly. "This is all a mistake."

But here he was interrupted by Demon Dukes's harsh tones. Beatrice's voice had attracted his attention to her. As he looked at her his face cleared.

"Hallo! what have we here? Her mother's daughter, point for point. And I'll be cursed if it ain't an improvement on the original stock! I had the honor to get the mitten from your mother, my dear, before you were thought of. That was my dog's luck. The plum went to Jack, as usual. I owe you that, too!" he growled, turning to Mr. Holyoke.

Beatrice shuddered. *This man a lover of her revered mother?*

But time changes all. In his day, Bob Dukes had been considered one of the most dashing young fellows in New York. He had been a leading member of the Gentlemen's Driving club, and an authority in yachting circles, and he had won eclat in the fashionable world in which he moved, by condescending to put on the gloves with a professional pugilist and "knocking him out." Then the belles were unanimous in the opinion that no one could dance like Bob Dukes.

"Bob," said his brother, as if there were propitiation in the use of the old familiar name, "I have not come two thousand miles to quarrel with you on your very threshold. There have been great changes during your thirty years' absence; but this is not the place to discuss them. Must I remind you that you have not invited us to enter your house?"

"Oh! you may go in," was the inhospitable reply. "I wouldn't turn a whining dog away. Hyar, you little imp!"

This last was addressed to the peon lad. He had waked from his sleep at the dread sound of his master's voice, but dared not move, lest he attract attention to himself. Now he jumped up, and stood trembling.

"Go in and tell Mrs. Demon Dukes"—he often so designated himself, with a fierce enjoyment of the terror he inspired—"that she has distinguished guests from the East. Step lively, now!"

The boy sidled past him, keeping his eye on the whip, and also manifesting dread of the bloodhounds. Just as he began to hope that he was about to escape for once, the stinging lash darted at his bare legs like a snake. With a yelp of pain, he leaped through the doorway, followed by the brutal laugh of his master.

Without a word more of invitation, Demon Dukes then entered, accompanied by his hounds, who seemed churlishly loth to take their eyes off the strangers. The door was thus left open for them to follow at their pleasure.

CHAPTER IV.

DEMON DUKES'S HOUSEHOLD.

"Oh, papa!" cried Beatrice, "this is intolerable. You cannot mean to cross that hateful threshold. Let us turn back at once."

"My darling, you know our situation. If I had known, I would not have brought you here. But be patient for to day. I have explanations to make which will change my brother's attitude toward us."

Never had her filial love a more bitter task than the conquest of pride demanded of her now, to enter there an unwelcome guest. She had avoided looking at Black-Horse Ben; but all through that wretched ordeal she had felt his presence. Now he presented himself at her side, to help her to dismount.

"Permit me!" he said, in a low, constrained voice, extending his hand to take hers.

She noticed the deepened respect in his voice, that he did not meet her eye, that his face was pale and stern, and that his hand was like ice. She softened toward him.

"I have not yet thanked you for the loan of your horse."

"You have honored me sufficiently by the use of him."

As she was about to withdraw her hand, his clasp suddenly tightened upon it, as, after an instant's hesitation, he went on with almost passionate earnestness, speaking rapidly and dropping his voice so that it was inaudible to her father, who was dismounting:

"The time may come when you will need the horse again—possibly both of us. If it ever does, will you promise me not to hesitate?"

She fixed a startled gaze upon his face. She recalled all that had occurred to disquiet her. What did he mean? What did he forebode? With a chill of apprehension creeping over her, she almost whispered:

"I will not."

"Thank you."

He dropped her hand at once.

She looked after him, half-moved to call him back, and question him, but her father called to her:

"Beta!"

And he looked so weak and worn and old that she at once gave him her arm to lean upon, and so they entered slowly.

The house was built in the Mexican style, inclosing a patio or open court. A veranda ran all round inside, upon which opened the doors of the various apartments. Here Demon Dukes was found, seated beside a table on which stood a bottle of whisky, two glasses and a box of cigars.

He had thrown his hat on the ground beside him, and elevated his feet on the table. His whip lay the length of the table, like a snake stretched in the sun, and the hounds crouched beneath it, with their huge heads between their paws, like bronze Cerberuses.

Behind his chair stood a broken-spirited woman, if there ever was one. She may have possessed a flower-like beauty in youth, but it had faded, leaving her sallow and shriveled. With a different husband she would probably have been peevish, but it was plain that Demon Dukes's discipline had effectually checked any such development.

"This," said the master of the house, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in her direction, "is Mrs. Demon Dukes—a very harmless person, you perceive, and strikingly unsuited to her formidable title; but, unfortunately, it was found quite impossible to make her over to suit."

Then changing his tone to one of contemptuous command, but in no other way indicating that he was addressing his wife:

"Show my niece to her room, and see that she is made comfortable."

"If you will please to follow me," said Mrs. Dukes, in a thin, high-pitched voice, her face as nearly as possible devoid of expression, as she looked at Beatrice with lack-luster eyes.

But before the girl could comply, they were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a quite different character.

It was a woman whose Spanish origin was unmistakable. She was slight, yet elegant in build, with the peculiar grace of the tropics in every lithe movement. Her complexion was of clear olive, so delicate that the sensitive play of color in her cheeks could not have been outrivalled by the purest blonde. Her lips were full and vividly red, corroborating the indication of her intensely black eyes, which, swimming in voluptuous lymph, burned with the internal fire of the opal.

She was in *dishabille*, both as to dress and as to the masses of raven black hair that fell over her shoulders in disordered profusion, as of one who had just risen from a siesta. Her toilet consisted of a flowing robe of soft silken texture and scarlet dye, open down the front, so as to disclose beneath an exquisitely-laced under-garment, the whole clinging to the rounded outlines of her figure.

About her neck was a coiled a golden serpent, with rubies for eyes. She had thrust her bare feet into Oriental slippers—mere heelless sandals with a covering for the toes.

This creature of blue skies and fervid suns sprung through the doorway, as if fleeing something startling.

"Ah! *Madre de Dios!*" she cried, catching a sight of Demon Dukes. "I have had a frightful dream, my hero!"

Then she observed the strangers, and drawing her robe together at the throat, but betraying no other sign of modesty or confusion, she advanced to his side more slowly, yet with no hesitation, throwing her hair back so as to disclose an ear like a sea-shell, while the flowing sleeve of her robe fell away from an arm that Hebe might have coveted, and gazing at his guests with the open curiosity of a child.

"Who are these people?" she asked, in low, flute-like tones, yet not dropping her voice so as to give any privacy to the question.

"No one that you need trouble your little head about, pretty one!" replied Demon Dukes. "Come! run away and finish your beauty sleep, dreaming of the one you love best."

He spoke caressingly, chucking her rosy chin, and letting his eye run over her person with a look of exultant pride and gloating admiration that made Beatrice's flesh creep.

In astonishment she looked from this ill-assorted pair to the wife insulted to her face.

Nothing could equal the perfect unconsciousness with which the Spanish woman had ignored the presence of Mrs. Dukes, except the unmoved serenity of that wreck of womanhood. She had not even looked her rival's way, nor shown by any outward sign that she heard her voice.

Her own cheeks flaming with shame, and her eyes flashing with resentment, Beatrice turned again to the monster who now, in her eyes, fully merited the fiendish epithet linked with his name.

She met the eyes of the Spaniard fixed upon her in an intent, almost fierce scrutiny. She

saw her turn suddenly pale, until her lips were bloodless, and little white indentations appeared just above the delicate wings of her nostrils. Then she bent swiftly, and whispered into Demon Dukes's ear, with an impetuous energy that was like the flare of a flash-torch.

Her auditor threw back his head and burst into a guffaw so uproarious that she sprang back from him, crouching like a startled animal.

"You jealous leetle devil!" he shouted, as soon as he could fetch breath—"you'll kill me one o' these days—I swar you will! Haw! haw! haw! haw!"

Beatrice had heard enough. This "creature" had dared to suppose her a rival! She turned sick and faint, and dropping her head with a sense of humiliation such as she had never before experienced, fairly pushed Mrs. Dukes before her, in her hurry to escape from the hateful presence of her husband.

The beautiful Spaniard gazed after her until she had made good her retreat, and then, utterly disregarding of Mr. Holyoke, sprang forward, pulled Demon Dukes's legs off the table, perched herself on his knee, and seizing him by both shoulders, and gazing straight into his eyes, cried with passionate intensity:

"Hah! you swear it?—no?"

"On my soul!" replied Dukes, still laughing.

She gazed at him steadily for a moment, and then rose slowly, reluctantly withdrawing her eyes, to cast upon Mr. Holyoke a look of suspicious hatred.

"If it is so," she went on, in low, intense, husky tones, turning back to Dukes, "beware!"

Her hand, as if involuntarily, sought her bosom.

Dukes knew that hidden there, suspended by a golden chain, hung a pearl-handled stiletto, with a large carbuncle set in the hilt. He suspected that its point was poisoned. With the recklessness of a man of his stamp, he did not interfere with her possession of the deadly toy. He accepted the risk to himself, and had no concern for others.

So, as if her feet clove to the way that led from her love's lord, she left them.

Demon Dukes followed her retreating figure with the look of gloating admiration that had shocked Beatrice.

At the doorway she stopped and looked back at him.

He quickly changed the expression of his face to a quizzical smile.

With a cry of petulant despair and rage that was more animal than human, she sprang across the threshold, slamming the door after her.

Demon Dukes turned at once to his half-brother. The careless smile had already left his lips. He again lifted his legs to the table, pushed the whisky bottle toward the other side, waved Mr. Holyoke to the chair opposite, and began:

"Waal, what have you got to say for yourself?"

In her room, the Spanish woman crept to the window, curtained without by climbing vines, and within, by lace—for the rest, unglazed, but capable of being closed against the storm by a shutter—and there bent her ear to listen.

CHAPTER V.

AN INFAMOUS RECORD.

MR. HOLYOKE remained standing, clinging to the back of the chair for support.

"Why don't you sit down?" demanded his brother, roughly.

"Robert, have you no—no explanation of the remarkable scene we have just witnessed?"

"What remarkable scene?"

And frowning blackly, Demon Dukes took up his whip, and began to lash the top of the table.

"Remember, it was my daughter and your niece whom you so carelessly exposed to what should never have come under the eye of an innocent girl."

"The deuce you say!"

"Had I foreseen what awaited her, I would have died a thousand deaths rather than bring her here."

"That's easily remedied. Take her away again."

"Would to God I could!"

And overcome by a sense of helplessness, the speaker sunk into the chair, and dropped his head on his arms on the table.

"I don't see anything to prevent. I will cheerfully afford you every facility. You need not lose five minutes. You came without invitation, and you can go without solicitation to prolong your stay."

"Man—man! are you utterly without heart? Can we be children of the same mother?"

"Mm! I believe that fact has never been seriously questioned."

The other broke down under this cool insolence.

"Bob," he said plaintively, "I came to you broken in health and fortune, and with that helpless child on my hands. As you say, I came without invitation, but do not suppose that either I or my child intend to be a burden on

you. Even if I fail, she has the means to guarantee a full return for any money expense we may be to you."

"Eh? What's that? You don't mean to say that old Hunky-nunky has left her his money-bags? I supposed the old miser had such a grip on his gold that the devil would never succeed in tearing him away from it; or if he really had to go, he would manage somehow to smuggle it through the Satanic custom-house. Is it possible that he has gone and not taken it with him?"

"Uncle Rob died a year ago, leaving the whole estate in trust, to be given to Beatrice only after my death and her coming of age."

"Only after your death? What the deuce does that mean? Did he live to scratch you, too, off his good books?—you, the saintly, the upright before the Lord?"

"Spare your sneers, Robert. Our uncle never questioned my integrity."

"Then what was the row?"

"I would rather not tell you."

"Eh? A nigger in the fence?"

Demon Dukes was so elated at the prospect of discovering some slip from the path of rectitude on the part of his brother, that he dropped his feet to the floor, squared round, and bent toward Mr. Holyoke across the table, scrutinizing his troubled face with eager curiosity and expectancy.

"Come, out with it!" he cried, roughly. "Do you hope to gull me? I swear, I'll go to New York, if necessary, but that I'll find out what it is."

"Well, then, if you force from me what I should never have referred to, he never forgave me for helping you to escape."

Demon Dukes stared at his brother with a slow-coming conviction that this was the truth; and the contemplation of injustice affording him pleasure, just as he delighted in cruelty, he leaned back in his chair and laughed long and loud.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! That joke is worth a trip to the States and back! Oh—ha! ha! ha! So blameless Jack fared no better than black-sheep Bob? Waal, old man, the rain falls on the just and on the unjust! I don't see that we can go back of that. But after all of your Sunday-school airs, it was a dog-gone shame! So he left it all to the little—what did you call her?—Beatrice, after her mother; and she's a great heiress. Now, what do you suppose it would figure up at?"

"A million and a quarter."

"Whew! And do you mean to say that you couldn't raise enough on such expectations to tide you over? You must have been in a hole."

"Do you suppose I would make such a use of my child's inheritance?"

"H'm. I think I'd get out of it the best way I could. But then I never had fancy notions."

Mr. Holyoke made no reply.

Demon Dukes scratched his ear.

"Waal," he said, "hyar's the place. Make the most of what you find; but don't look to me to play the hospitable host nor affectionate brother. That ain't in my line."

Mr. Holyoke sat gazing straight before him, his face hardening into a look of resolve.

"Robert, if I anger you so that you refuse to help me, my child and I will have to go forth into the world, in a strange country, without money and without friends, to struggle for a livelihood as we best may. In my present state of health such exposure means death to me and unknown privation and peril to my child. Yet I would face this myself, and expose her to it, rather than teach her to look with complacency on vice as the price of her daily bread!"

"All of which moral and elevating discourse is, I suppose, aimed at the head of poor, harmless little Pipa. If I catch your drift, it is preliminary to the modest request that I cut her loose, and disinfect the place for the reception of your immaculate daughter. Waal, I'd see you sunk first!—you and your whole breed and generation."

And reversing his whip, he struck the table a resounding blow with its loaded end.

The hounds responded ominously.

"The place suits me just as it is. If it don't suit you, git!"

Mr. Holyoke was shaken to his soul's center. His husky voice, his quivering lips, the tears that gathered in his eyes and coursed one by one down his cheeks and beard, showed how, in that terrible struggle, physical weakness hung like a mill-stone about the neck of the sovereign spirit.

"With your domestic relations I have neither right nor inclination to meddle. I observe only a father's duty in refusing to expose my daughter to such influences. But I was about to propose a way in which you can help me without loss or inconvenience to yourself."

"Waal, out with it!"

"Lend me the money for our support, even in the humblest way, until I regain my health and get a new start. If death overtake me in the struggle, my daughter will reimburse you, principal and interest. You see that you can lose nothing; and you will be saving a broken-hearted man from despair."

Reaching across the table and putting his hand on the brown fist that gripped the whip-butt with inflexible resolve—after a separation of thirty years they had not yet been palm to palm—he made his last appeal, his voice shaken into sobs.

"Bob, for the sake of my child—for the sake of her dead mother, don't refuse me this!"

Demon Dukes compressed his lips and shook his head.

"I'm not lending money in that way. Hyar's my ranch, as good as you'll find anywhere. If your daughter is too nice to live in it, so much the worse for her."

The wretched father dropped his head on the table, and a groan escaped him.

Demon Dukes sat unmoved.

Presently he struggled to his feet, and started to move away, groping in bewilderment.

"Waal, what now?" demanded his brother, unfeelingly.

"I am going to take my child away."

"Sit down," said Dukes. "Perhaps we can come to an understanding yet."

Mr. Holyoke started. A flash of hope flitted across his face like the glimmer of heat-lightning in a darkened sky.

"Do you mean it, Bob?"

"Didn't I say it? Sit down before I get out of the notion."

Trembling with eagerness, as with the infirmity of age, Mr. Holyoke crept back to his chair, and sat down.

"Why, man, you're all broke up," said Dukes. "Take something to brace up on."

And he pushed the liquor toward his brother. Fearful of giving offense by a refusal, Mr. Holyoke gulped down a few swallows spasmodically.

Demon Dukes threw back his head, and tossed "three fingers" down his throat as down a hatchway.

"There's no reason why we should make day's-work of the matter," he went on. "Take things comfortably—that's my motto. Have a weed, Jack. They are Mexican; I ran them across the border myself."

And utterly disregarding of the piteous eyes that hung upon his movements, the ears strained to catch his next words, he smoked luxuriously, rocking on the hind legs of his chair, and blowing smoke-rings into the air. This anguish of suspense added to the zest of his cigar.

Finally he spoke.

"Now, how would it strike you, if the little beauty whose manifestations of partiality for me have been such a stench in your sanctimonious nostrils, should turn out to be my wife?"

"Your wife?"

"Death and furies! Am I so old or ugly that a pretty jade should refuse to run in legal harness with me? You assumed that we were rigged tandem—then why not both at the pole?"

"But you introduced the other—"

"So I did; but what of that? I've had a baker's dozen of 'em since that little mistake about my signature. It was my signature, you know, though twelve of my unwashed fellow-citizens took it into their wooden heads that the handwriting bore too striking a resemblance to the pot-hooks of the Robert Dukes who was distinguished from his graceless nephew by having a bank-account. But that's the defect of the jury system. And was I responsible for that relic of barbarism?"

"But this—this—your wife?"

"Put it in the plural, Jack—my wives. I'll tell you all about it. When you pulled me out of the mud and gave me a bone to gnaw and a kick to help me on my way—five hundred dollars, of which young Jack Holyoke had depleted his first savings, in addition to helping his scapegrace half-brother to escape from prison—"I was not quite deserted by lovely woman. You know that the dear creatures were always ready for a fling with me, on the principle of the bigger devil, the more fascinating. With most of them it was merely an exciting little game of who dare have the most delicious flirtation with wild Bob, who set mamma-hens to clucking and gathering their broods wherever he went, and still look Mrs. Grundy demurely in the face; but one was in dead earnest. You remember Mary Alwait?—a plump little puss, all fluffly-flummery as to dress, and languid, lovey-dovey as to manners;—just my style, or perhaps I had better say one of my styles; for curse me if I don't love 'em all! Well, you have just seen what is left of her."

"What! that—that—wreck?"

"Exactly. I was fool enough over her tow-head and pearl-powder complexion to think her worth the risk of recapture. After the first hue and cry was over, I crept back and dodged the detectives until I got a chance to whisper in her credulous ear, that, in my opinion, Heaven was within the circle of her soft arms, and the other place occupied all the rest of space. She thought the world well lost in becoming Mrs. Bob Dukes, though she shed the usual tears at having to leave her parents in ignorance of what had become of her."

"And her sudden disappearance has been one of the unsolved mysteries of metropolitan life."

It broke her mother's heart, and left her father to a wifeless, childless, purposeless old age!"

"Very likely. Well, I fared variously. Contrary to your excellent advice, my first recourse was to the devil's bible. But I soon found that professional gambling was a quite different thing from amateur fleecing of the sap-head scions of metropolitan aristocracy. Sometimes I was up, but for the most part down, until I struck an agent of the Wells-Fargo Express, and cleaned out his money-box. He accused me of cheating. It is but fair to his discernment to admit that he had undeniable grounds for the charge. His only mistake was in the method of procedure. He should have shot first and explained afterward. As it was, I got the drop on him and saved him an awkward interview with his employers. Click!—bang! He passed out, and I pocketed the plunder."

"I next turned up at Salt Lake City; and as there had been nothing particularly celestial in my experience thus far, I joined the Saints, for a change. In the atmosphere of the New Jerusalem Mrs. Dukes suddenly developed a talent for vituperative eloquence which yielded only to Mormon logic embodied in a whip similar to this. She then passed through a season of lachrymose martyrdom into chronic sulks, from which she has never since emerged. But she kept her mouth shut and didn't pull hair; which is more than can be said of most of 'em."

"And didn't I run a gilt-edged seraglio? I had the ducats, and so took my pick of the youth and beauty of the elect. Instead of putting them in separate houses and setting them to work, like those coarse-grained fellows, I housed them together in a palace, and had them waited on like sultanas. You may believe that that did not diminish my popularity with the outside fair; so it goes without saying that I was not long in stirring the bile of my fellow-saints, even to the Prophet himself."

"But women are cats. The softer their paws, the more fiercely they spit and scratch. And when I introduced, as wife No. 10, an Indian princess that I had picked up on the Gila river, you may bet that house was a bedlam. Even in facial beauty she was the peer of my queen of the harem; and in noble bearing and magnificence of style none of them could compare with her. You should have seen the haughty superiority with which she walked among them. They made common cause against her; but their petty shafts of feminine spite glanced harmlessly from her armor of regal scorn. I have no doubt that their fingers itched to score their compliments on her pretty face; but one glance of her black eyes routed them."

"At last she presented me with a little leather-colored heir. You would have thought her a tigress guarding her cub. She would not let him out of her sight, intimating that some of the jealous jades would strangle him, if they got the chance; and perhaps she wasn't far from right."

"At any rate, it got too hot for my comfort; and I was tired of the thing, what with the internal strife and outside jealousies. So I actually traded 'em off, like stock, letting the cubs—of which there were a score, more or less—go with their dams. All but my Chicco and my hemlock-tanned little Jack—I had the grace to name him after his respected uncle and his father's one-time benefactor;—all but these, who were my treasures, and Mrs. Dukes No. 1, whom nobody would take at any figure, even if she had not, with her usual contrariety, objected to being transferred as property. Well, she has been useful to me, by assuming the management of my household, and not interfering with the ladies who have contributed to my pleasure."

"The female of all savage races early degenerates into a bag of unaccountable ugliness! so it was inevitable that Chicco should ere long have a rival. But Mrs. Dukes No. 10 proved less complaisant than Mrs. Dukes No. 1. She was inconsiderate enough to try to poison us all, and then fled with her child. I could not consent to lose my plucky little Jack; and seeing that it was impossible to elude pursuit, she stabbed the child and herself. Her prompt departure to the Happy Hunting-Grounds relieved me of a troublesome burden. The boy lived; and if, when you see him, you don't say that he's a credit to his dad, then you're not of my taste."

"But not to linger over tedious details, the last Mrs. Dukes I picked up—literally picked up—in Chihuahua. The circumstances were romantic—indeed they account for my hold on her affections as well as her person—and you shall hear them some day. But the only point of importance just now is that she is really married to me, with all due form, according to the light of the Latter day Saints. And you can't go back of a man's religion, you know—ha! ha! ha!"

With such Mephistophelean gibe did Demon Dukes flout the false sanctions with which he had—seemingly in sheer wantonness and mockery—chosen to veil his infamies.

"Now," he went on, "as fine ladies as are in the land have counted it no dishonor to be guests of the Prophet and his elders. Fashion, you know, makes all the difference betwixt tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee. Nobody boggles

at facts, but at names. A wife's a wife, no matter how unorthodox her credentials. Then why cavil at the standing of poor Pipa? You don't give me credit for the delicacy of deferring her introduction until I had defined to a shade her social status. Accept her as you would Mrs. Brigham Young No. 20-odd; and your daughter will find in her a charming companion, if somewhat unconventional. Come! what do you say?"

And so broken was this poor father, that, while he shuddered at the cold-blooded heartlessness, the devilish sneers at all that is sacred, of this monster of iniquity, he yet tried to blind his clear vision with this specious argument, that this blackness of infamy was not quite so black as he had feared, and must be endured, at least for a time.

"Robert," he said, "I don't pretend to approve of your past life, nor of your present position; but I find myself in stress of circumstances, where I cannot insist on having everything exactly to my wish. Even so flimsy a pretext—pardon me, but I cannot look upon it otherwise—will be something with which I can appear before my daughter not quite in the position of a man who compounds with vice, and permits his child to eat the bread of dishonor. I accept for her and myself the shelter you offer us, only until I can place her beneath a roof, however humble, where she can breathe an atmosphere as untainted as that she found in her mother's house."

"Waal," said Demon Dukes, scratching his head, "that isn't the most gracious acceptance possible; but then I'm a patient man—a very patient man!"

"May I go to my daughter?" asked Mr. Holyoke, humbly.

"Without doubt," replied his host. "To tell you the truth, I'm somewhat tired of your company."

He whistled—one would have thought to the hounds; but they did not move. Instead, the crushed woman who had been Mary Alwait appeared through one of the doors, evidently summoned in this contemptuous manner.

"Show Mr. Holyoke into the presence of his daughter, ordered her master, without looking round.

"If you will please to follow me," she said, using the same formula with which she had addressed Beatrice.

Mr. Holyoke looked at her sadly; but she had turned with no sign of recognition in her dull face, and was walking away with a dead, mechanical step.

With a sigh he followed her; and looking after him, Demon Dukes noted his bent form and tottering pace; so had he aged in that short while—noted these signs of decay with a smile of satisfaction which, as the object of it disappeared, became a low, ghoul-like chuckle.

"Ha! ha! ha! There goes a million and a quarter—on a slim hand—a mighty slim hand! If I don't call it—Ha! ha!"

And the hounds rumbled a deep undertone. After finishing his cigar, their master rose and left the house, accompanied by the companions so congenial to his brutal nature.

Before the stables he found Black-Hoss Ben industriously rubbing Black Diamond down. The horse was enjoying this to the full; to the man it was a labor of love, as was attested by the caressing pats and words of playful affection with which he transformed the mechanical business of grooming into something healthful and humanizing to look at.

"And who the deuce are you?" was the harsh salute with which Demon Dukes broke in upon the harmony of this scene.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK.

BLACK DIAMOND showed some uneasiness at the approach of the bloodhounds, pricking his ears forward, rolling his eyes, tossing his head with a snort, and stamping one fore foot.

His master first quieted him, patting him gently on the shoulder, and saying soothingly: "So, sweetheart! There's nothing to fear."

Then, as if it were a matter secondary to the assurance of his horse, he looked quietly across the back of the animal at the master of Dukes's Den, and replied to his brusque challenge:

"You will find me a gentleman, among gentlemen, but a devilish ugly customer to step on."

"Ah, indeed!" responded Demon Dukes. "And what might I call you, pray?"

Black-Hoss Ben had already resumed the care of his horse. As he bent over the task of rubbing down a hock and cannon-bone, he answered, carelessly:—

"I am best known in this part of the country as Black-Hoss Ben."

"H'm!" ejaculated Demon Dukes, who had heard the name, but did not think fit to admit it just then. "I don't suppose it matters much which particular Ben, or Jack, or Tom. They all smack pretty much alike. I reckon, for the time being, you are my brother's servant."

Ben smiled, as if only amused.

"Do I look like anybody's servant?" he asked, adding—"of course, your humble servant!"

"If not," cried Demon Dukes, feeling that his cool interlocutor was getting rather the better of him, "what are you doing here, making free with my stable? If you come as a gentleman, why don't you act as one, and give your horse up to the care of my servants?"

"You haven't a man on the place good enough to groom this horse," was Black-Hoss Ben's cool rejoinder.

"Caramba!" growled a black-browed Mexican at his back, letting his hand fall on the haft of a dagger thrust into his sash; and Black-Hoss Ben, at the very outset, had made a deadly enemy of the chief of the stables.

Several peons stood in the doorway, gaping open-mouthed at the stranger who dared to beard their leonine master in his den.

Demon Dukes began to lose patience.

"Come! come! what is your business here?" he demanded, irritably.

Having now finished his work, Black-Hoss Ben leaned easily on his horse's rump, as he replied:

"Now you are talking to some purpose. My acting as guide to your guest—only one of those courtesies which one gentleman may at any time extend to another—was incidental to a little project of my own. I am here to apply for a place in your employ."

Demon Dukes stared in surprise.

"You have gone about the matter in a rather peculiar manner," he suggested.

"We all have our ways of doing things," said Ben, smiling pleasantly.

"So it seems. This, then, is my way of declining your proposal:—you will oblige me by taking yourself off these premises with the greatest expedition consistent with your dignity."

"Pardon me!" replied Black-Hoss Ben, not at all discomfited; "but I am confident that you are speaking unadvisedly. You don't know your need of my services, nor my peculiar fitness for the office I seek."

"There is no place on my ranch that is not filled as well as you could fill it."

"Your words confirm my suspicions."

"What is that?"

"It is my painful duty to inform you that the most important post under your management is vacant."

Demon Dukes started.

"Eh? What post?"

"That of your general overseer, recently filled by Polo Treviador."

"What! Treviador—"

"Is dead!"

Demon Dukes, now thoroughly roused, looked as became his name. His brows were as black as night; his eyes glared savagely.

"What has happened? Speak!" he cried. "Who has killed my overseer? Has he been robbed, too?"

With no manifestation of sympathetic interest, Black-Hoss Ben replied:

"Treviador was in the coach with Mr. Holyoke—"

"With Mr. Holyoke? Then why was I not told of this before?"

"Mr. Holyoke is probably unacquainted with your interest in the dead man, even if he knows that he was killed."

"Yes, yes! Well, go on."

"The coach was attacked in the dip just beyond Hudson's place—"

"And five thousand dollars of my money gone up the spout!" growled Demon Dukes, grinding his teeth with rage.

He then burst into profane objurgation against his dead overseer.

"He lost his life in the defense of the dirty stuff," observed Ben, coolly.

"To the deuce with his life!" roared the furious ranchero. "Am I any the less out of pocket?"

And he stamped about, lashing the ground with his whip, and loading the air with execrations.

Black-Hoss Ben carelessly lifted his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. He evidently took no interest in Demon Dukes's disturbance of temper.

Annoyed by this cool, almost contemptuous indifference, that gentleman betrayed a disposition to quarrel with him.

"All this happened in company with you and Mr. Holyoke. How is it that you both come off without a scratch?"

Black-Hoss Ben related the incidents of the assault, passing as briefly as possible over his own participation.

"H'm! This sounds rather strange, sir," said Dukes, suspiciously.

"You know the adage," smiled Ben, "Truth is stranger than fiction."

"But I don't know you. What evidence have I that it was not all done at your instigation, and that your application now is not a part of the plot?"

To this direct charge Black-Hoss Ben replied only with a peculiar smile.

"I have asked you a question," said Dukes, trembling with suppressed fury.

"Ye-es," drawled Ben. "It was quite audible."

"No doubt."

"Well, sir, I am used to getting answers."

Ben ran his eye over the enraged ranchero with something of the interest with which one might examine a curiosity in natural history.

"By Heaven! I can tear one out of you, at a word—a sign."

Demon Dukes evidently referred to his hounds. From the first they had betrayed marked signs of hostility to Black-Hoss Ben. With their heads hanging to the ground, they had glared at him, moving restlessly and uttering low whines of excitement, as if chafing in the leash and awaiting but the word of command to spring and rend.

The stablemen in the doorway at Ben's back were ugly-looking specimens of the bad race-mixtures that abound in the southwestern territories of the United States.

The effect of their dusky visages, fiery black eyes and straight, coarse hair, was heightened by their bandit-like dress—broad-brimmed black felt sombreros, with bullion torquilla and tassels, embroidered and button-decorated jackets, and wide duck trousers, with gay sash supporting pistols and stiletto. And the clannish spirit of ignorance making them ready to side with the worst of masters against any stranger, they fingered their weapons and scowled as savagely as if resenting personal insult.

But, content to watch them with his ears, Black-Hoss Ben stood as calmly in the midst of his foes as if unconscious of danger.

What a contrast was presented by a spectator of whom he at that moment caught sight on the roof of the hacienda!

It was Beatrice. She stood clutching the adobe parapet, in an agony of dread that bespoke some feeling deeper than mere humanitarian interest. She would have cried out, but for a feeling that her interference might precipitate the danger which Ben's tact might yet avert.

Ben counted that sight cheaply bought at the risk he ran to secure it.

But Demon Dukes had threatened him with his hounds; and his horse again manifested signs of uneasiness.

As if annoyed by this last, Ben quieted him with a pat and a word; then, while his eyes took on the peculiar expression which gives a mesmeric power to the gaze of a beast-tamer, he strode boldly toward the hounds. They crouched to the ground with low whines, as he advanced. Seizing the fierce brutes by their collars, he lifted them bodily, held them a moment at full arm's-length, then cast them from him. With every manifestation of fear, they slunk round to their master's rear, dragging their bellies on the ground.

Demon Dukes stared in amazement, scarcely able to credit the evidence of his senses.

Black-Hoss Ben coolly walked back to his horse, loosening the crimson sash that encircled his waist. Beneath it he unbuckled a leathern belt, and tossed it so that it fell at Demon Dukes's feet with a heavy thud, pierced, so to speak, by a sharp, metallic clink.

Then he quietly busied himself re-adjusting the sash.

Beatrice, whose heart had stood still, breathed again.

The Mexicans, who had stared at this daring deed in stupid bewilderment, crossed themselves, muttering incantations against the evil-eye, in which the words *demonio* and *encantador* might have been heard in deep gutturals.

Demon Dukes, when his astonishment was over, waxed furious.

"What!" he roared, with a torrent of profanity; "have I kept by me curs that a man can empty-handed send whining with their tails between their legs?"

And in a transport of chagrin, he drew a revolver and shot them in succession through the head.

Those to whom these beasts had been a constant source of terror knew not whether to rejoice at their removal or fear that their master would make up for it with increased fiendishness.

Turning, Demon Dukes struck his foot against the belt Black-Hoss Ben had so contemptuously tossed to him.

"Eh—what's this?" he asked, stooping to pick it up.

"It is my certificate of character," said Ben, sneeringly.

"Polo Treviador's money-belt. It is damp—"

"With his blood."

"And heavy with money—which is more to the purpose."

Opening it, he allowed the coin to run out into his broad palm.

"Gold! and"—weighing it in his hand—"heavy enough to figure up the full amount. Hang me if I don't believe that you are an honest fellow, after all! How did you come to save it?"

"By shooting the robber who had got possession of it. Here is something by which you may recognize him."

And he tossed to the ranchero a gay silk hand-

kerchief, which he had drawn from the breast of his jerkin.

"Ned Coburn! I gave him his walking-papers, not two weeks ago, for mistaking who ran the place. He won this, along with the favor of that pretty bussy, Chiquita, at the last holiday sports. But how came you to know so much about him?"

"He was too faithful a follower of your hopeful son to be much of a stranger in these parts," replied Ben, meaningly.

Demon Dukes frowned blackly.

"M'h'm!" he muttered, as if Ben's words had started a fertile train of thought.

Then, after a momentary pause, he asked:

"What other qualifications have you for the place?"

"I can whip, with or without arms, and in any way that suits him, any man that ever set foot in your ranch. As for business details, I can take as much off your hands as you care to turn over to an assistant."

"I see that you understand the requirements of the place," said Dukes. "I don't mind admitting that, take it all in all, I like your style. I will see you later; when I have no doubt we shall come to terms without great difficulty. Meanwhile, make yourself at home—if such an invitation is necessary to one of your self-complacency."

He turned toward the house, and Black-Hoss Ben proceeded to stable his horse, finding the stablemen now as servile as a moment before they had been menacing.

He coolly gave orders for the tearing away of the partition between two stalls, so as to form a roomy box into which to turn Black Diamond, free from the restraint of halter-strap.

But in the midst of these directions he was startled by a succession of shrill screams coming from the dwelling-house.

He felt, rather than reasoned, that it was Beatrice; and with a whistle to his horse to follow him, so that he might be prepared for any emergency, he ran at the top of his speed to the scene of distress.

CHAPTER VII. ORPHANED.

ONCE alone, Beta cast herself face-downward on the blanket-covered bunk bed which contrasted so wretchedly with the elegance she had enjoyed all her life. But to this she could easily accommodate herself. It was the people!

So her father found her when he entered.

She sprung up, a torrent of passionate protest rushing to her lips; but before it gained utterance, she was struck by his feebleness of step and the expression of crushing humiliation on his face.

With a cry of pain, indignation and despair, she cast herself upon his breast, twining her arms about his neck.

"Oh, papa! papa! papa!"

"Hush! hush, my child!" he said, trying to speak bravely. But weakness compelled him to add:

"Let me sit down; and we will canvass our future calmly."

He looked so pale and exhausted that, instead of placing him in the only chair, an article of home manufacture as comfortless as inelegant, she made him lie on her bed.

He sunk upon the couch, gasping helplessly; and she had to lift his feet upon it.

Then she ran to the window, which opened upon the veranda and patio beside the door, the opposite or exterior wall of the structure being blank, like the division walls between the various apartments; for an adobe house, like a mediæval castle, is expected to serve as a fortress when occasion requires. In the embrasure stood a curiously-shaped Mexican *caja*, or earthen water-jar, the top closed by a rude bowl of the same ware.

Filling one vessel from the other, Beta hastened back to her father, lifting his head on her arm, and holding the refreshing draught to his lips; and then bathed his temples with tremulous hands, watching him with eyes in which suspense staved the tears engendered by fear.

"Thank you, my dear," he said. "I feel better. I think the ride must have been too much for me, in this rarefied mountain air."

But the listener, recalling how the ride had stimulated him, knew that this was a subterfuge to soothe her anxiety. Nature had been kind enough; it was "man's inhumanity to man" that had wrought the mischief.

Her heart was too full to reply. She only kissed his pale brow.

"Sit down, my dear—here, on the edge of the bed—and I will tell you of my interview with your uncle."

The blood rushed to her face in indignant repudiation of the relationship, as she complied; but woman's tender forbearance checked the words with which, just in themselves, her father must not be further agitated.

"It is not quite so bad as it seemed, Beta," he began; "though it is worse—far worse than anything I expected my daughter ever to look upon, and not fly at once with scorn and detestation."

As she listened, she dropped her face upon

the pillow, where his eyes might not see the crimson tide of shame that flamed from chin to temples, and swept round her neck. Never before had her sensitive soul been so shocked. Only a mother's tender words, made wise by that love which is like no other love, had unvailed to her as far as was needful the darker aspects of human frailty.

Her father, to whom these signs of virginal delicacy were grateful assurances of the future he might not be spared to watch over, went on:

"He assures me that he is married to—both!—legally, according to the interpretation of the church with which he has chosen to associate himself. He professes to be a Mormon."

He felt a spasmodic tremor run through her, a mute protest against the shallow evasion.

"My darling," he said, "I am with you in sentiment. Yet the usages of an organized society, even at variance with all that is held most sacred, always receive a certain recognition from the world. May not this, then, be some extenuation—some justification, if we do not—scan—over-closely—"

But the words choked him. He could not now mold to circumstance the unswerving integrity he had inculcated in his daughter from her cradle.

"Oh, my child! my child!" he cried, taking her in his arms, "it is black!—damnable! But we are helpless—caught in a snare. How can we go forth into this strange world? Exposure just now means death to me. I would face that if it were all. But what would become of you, left alone—utterly alone, without friends, without money, without experience, in a land where pitfalls would line your path at every step? Oh! my helpless darling, we cannot! we cannot! It is for but a little while. Soon—very soon I shall have some safe and pure retreat for you. A shelter, of the meanest, is all that we ask. Until then, he offers us this resting-place, for which we can repay him in money, as to any stranger."

Inadequate to sustained passion, his voice sunk to a piteous appeal.

His child wound her loving arms about him, and said:

"There! there! say no more. It is arranged."

"And you forgive me, dear?"

"My poor, poor, darling papa!—there is nothing to forgive. We suffer together."

So she soothed him, until, from sheer weakness, like a sufferer in the reaction after an interval of physical pain, he sunk without warning to sleep.

But her soul was tossed by the throes of a mighty pain, until she half-fancied that the commotion within her must disturb his slumbers. Then, too, the room, adjoining that of the Spanish woman, seemed stifling, as if the very air were tainted by her respiration.

Peering forth, Beta learned that the veranda was deserted. Demon Dukes had just taken himself off.

In the other direction she saw the stairway which led to the housetop. A moment later, her flying feet were bearing her up to the pure breath of the flower-carpeted plateau.

She was just in time to witness the meeting of Black-Hoss Ben and Demon Dukes.

How grandly self-possessed he was! How brute force acknowledged the master spirit! But, perhaps what impressed her most, was his power over the hounds, and that unexpected exhibition of physical strength. After that, it seemed as if there were nothing that he might not do.

Then, fearing discovery as Demon Dukes turned again toward the house, she shrunk from the parapet, and hastened back to her room.

Her father lay as she had left him, a short quarter-hour ago. Coming in from the broader light, she could not discern his face clearly enough to be struck by any change in it. Fearing to disturb him, she sat down on a stool near the door, and dropped her face into her hands, to think.

Presently she was struck by the strange stillness of the room. She could not hear her father breathe.

In sudden, undefined panic she sprung to his side. He lay without perceptible movement.

"Papa! papa!" she cried; seizing hold of him.

His body resisted her touch with a leaden inertia.

"Papa! oh, papa! speak to me!" again she cried.

He heeded not.

She lifted his head so as to turn his face to the light. The eyes were closed, the jaw dropped, and all was bloodless and clammy. The head slipped from her nerveless grasp, and fell back upon the pillow like a stone.

"Dead!—dead!" she said to herself, in a hoarse, scared whisper.

For a moment she stood thus, dazed. Then she turned, staggering toward the door. Only after she had passed through it did she begin to shriek, and a moment later, fell prone on the floor of the veranda, wrapped in merciful oblivion.

The different occupants of the house were variously affected. Pipa, who had cast herself on her bed in a transport of rage, to tear her beautiful hair and rend her delicate garments; to snatch off and cast away her ornaments; and finally to cover her head in the bed-clothes and cry like an angry child, now lay still, cowering closer and crossing herself in superstitious terror. Demon Dukes stamped into the house swearing, as beasts are thrown into rage by any form of excitement. The women of the house fluttered to the scene of distress like a covey of startled pigeons. Mrs. Dukes alone moved as calmly as if propelled by clock-work.

Before giving attention to the swooning girl, she went to investigate the cause of her disturbance.

Demon Dukes was at her heels.

"The man is dead," she said coldly.

"Dead?" repeated her husband. "Impossible! He was alive enough ten minutes ago."

"Look for yourself," was her indifferent reply.

"But dead! What can have killed him?"

Demon Dukes bent over the motionless form of his half-brother.

"Dead!" he reiterated; and then, thoughtfully—"H'm!"

The woman stood with her hands folded across her waist, as if awaiting the expression of his will.

"Ah!" he said, turning slowly away and walking out of the room; "that simplifies matters."

Here he heard the voice of Black-Hoss Ben out on the veranda.

"What is to be done with this poor girl? Is there any one here to see that she has attention? Come—come! stop your jabbering and show me a room and a bed to lay her on."

How he had made his appearance no one knew; but the women had been suddenly brushed aside, and he had lifted unconscious Beta in his arms. Her head lay on his shoulder, her bloodless lips touching his neck.

Demon Dukes scowled, but did not interfere in words.

Mrs. Dukes calmly assumed direction of affairs.

"Bring her in here," she said, opening another door.

Black-Hoss Ben followed her, laid his burden tenderly on the bed, and then turned to the ice-woman, demanding, as sternly as he had ever addressed a woman:

"What is the meaning of this? What has been done to her?"

"Her father is dead."

"Dead? Murdered?"

He started back aghast.

The woman looked at him, unstartled by the implied accusation.

"He lies in the room second beyond this," was all that she said.

Black-Hoss Ben turned in bewilderment from the room.

Demon Dukes had heard his exclamation through the open door, and there was an unpleasant look in his eyes as he confronted him coming forth.

"You have strange fancies," he said. "Do not men die sometimes suddenly without assistance from their friends?"

"Let me see him," said Ben. "It may be only a cataleptic trance. The man was in no condition to sustain unusual excitement."

A glance killed that hope; but Ben had an object in still seeming to cling to it. It would enable him to bring a physician to Beatrice without betraying an undue solicitude in her behalf.

"We want a doctor here," he said. "I have seen a man who looked like that who lived after ward for years."

A moment later he bestrode his peerless steed, and went skimming over the level surface of the plateau like a bird.

"A man of promptness and energy," said Demon Dukes to himself. "Perhaps I have lost nothing in exchanging Polo Treviador for him."

The morning's canter had been no tax on the superb powers of Black Diamond. It had but got him in trim for the tremendous pace with which, nothing loth, he now responded to his master's eagerness. Down grade and up, over cloud-piercing peaks and through canyons whose funereal depths the sun never fathomed, the ringing clang of his hoofs marked his unabated progress.

At last, foam-flecked and panting, yet with his eyes rolling in proud consciousness of the wonderful feat he had accomplished, he stood receiving royally the admiration of a circle of the rude fellows who hang a man for stealing a horse, but invite him to quit their camp only when his propensity for manslaughter is so freely indulged as to excite general apprehension.

Even then, when the physician, on the best mount attainable, was secured, he had sufficient bottom to tax to the utmost the powers of the fresh horse on their fleet return.

Having impressed the doctor with the probability that the daughter would need his services even if her father proved beyond the

reach of his art, Black-Hoss Ben let him enter the house alone, while he blanketed Black Diamond, and walked him about, to cool off.

Mr. Holyoke was dead beyond question.

Beatrice had passed from one fainting-fit to another, until the white-lipped and tearful women huddled together, wringing their hands and crossing themselves, and murmuring broken prayers to the saints and the Mother of God to spare her life and reason.

Mrs. Dukes alone remained outwardly unmoved; yet in her icy way she did all that the most careful nurse could have done. She banished the sighing and crying and utterly useless women, and then listened intelligently to the doctor's directions. At last Beatrice slept under the influence of opiates, in a darkened and deserted room, while the strange woman addressed herself to the service of the dead.

Then came Pipa, with the wary alertness of a startled fawn, stealing into Beta's chamber. Standing beside the unconscious girl, she gazed into the face with its marble beauty now unmarred by pain—gazed until her Oriental eyes, growing wider and darker, finally overflowed; and when she bent and touched her glowing lips to the cold and unresponsive ones, she left a tear on the white cheek. Then she looked about on the cheerless room, and her eyes kindled and her cheeks flushed with generous indignation.

"Ah! *Madre de Dios!*" she cried. "This is sacrilege! So beautiful, and shut up in this prison!"

Swiftly she left the room, nor stopped until she stood in the presence of Mrs. Dukes. Gazing upon her with haughty contempt, and addressing her with the air of an offended princess, she said:

"Have you no sense of what is due to the niece of Don Roberto? Is she to herd with the rest of you in your peons' barracoon? See to it that she is brought into my apartments at once!"

It is rebuke, administered with stinging intensity, she swept away without waiting for reply.

Mrs. Dukes received the affront with stony immobility, and forthwith set about executing the Spanish woman's will.

Under her direction, four women lifted Beatrice on the blankets on which she lay, and bore her into the next apartments.

The change was as from a desert to a paradise. Here was a retreat of which nothing about the ranch gave promise. Instead of one room, there were three, *en suite*, consisting of a boudoir, a bed-chamber and an oratorio. They were lighted from the top, through sky-lights of ground glass, furnished with blinds and variously-tinted curtains of silk, by means of which the light could be tempered to any shade a sybaritic fancy might choose.

In the luxurious furnishing of these apartments money had been lavished without stint. The style was Oriental, from the Turkish rugs and tapestries, and divans as soft as eider-down, to the lamps, swung in chains, that exhaled subtle perfume on the air.

In marked contrast with the two rooms of which the foregoing description was true, the oratorio was as severely barren as a hermit's cell. The floor was of stone; the undecorated walls were of the sun-baked adobes of which the outer walls were built; and the round sky-light was of plain glass, which let the sun beat in with unobstructed directness. In the center stood a *priedieu* of wood quaintly carved and black with age, while on a peg hung a penance-gown of hair-cloth. A lot of religious relics were variously disposed about the closet-like apartment.

When Beatrice awoke to consciousness, her first sight was of the great, dark eyes of the Spanish woman, fixed upon her curiously, yet kindly and pityingly. She smiled, with tender regret in her humid eyes and hopeful cheerfulness in her white teeth. Her hand was cold and moist, and her touch as soft as a benediction. In spite of herself, Beatrice was won.

How could she associate with evil the almost infantile prattle of this child of the sun? Yet the abandon, the *verve* with which she sung to the accompaniment of a Spanish lute ballads of most fervid and impassioned tone was, it must be granted, a little startling to Puritanical ears.

The upshot of it all was, that Beta thought her more sinned against than sinning, and pitied her, and—why not confess it?—let her desolate heart go out to her in love, resolving to make an effort to awaken her to a higher life.

How promising a subject she had for this missionary effort, let the sequel show.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHILDREN OF THE SUN.

WHEN Demon Dukes demurred to the arrangement which shut him out from his favorite, Pipa took him by the beard, and shaking a rosy finger in his face, said:

"Monster! Turk! Must all the world be in attendance on you, then? One must cut short one's prayers to the Virgin Mother, lest you wait, eh?"

"Only my black-eyed peri!" pleaded Dukes.

She smiled radiantly.

"But the invalid? She is your niece, eh? She is a lady, eh? Must she then lodge in a cell that a vaquero would scorn? What would you? Prepare an apartment suitable for her."

"With all my heart," cried Dukes; "and the sooner the better. You yourself shall direct the work, so that it may be done to your liking. And now what is to be my reward for this amiability?"

"This!"

And tweaking his nose between her delicate finger and thumb, instead of granting the kiss he demanded, she ran away, laughing merrily. By such perverse little arts, not by a humdrum compliance with every wish, doth the knowing fair whet the appetite of her lover!

With the generosity of a tropical nature, Pipa stripped her own apartments to furnish to her taste a retreat for Beatrice, to whom she had taken a great fancy. Then she installed her with mock pomp and great merriment.

Having asserted her supremacy by keeping Dukes waiting, she indicated her readiness to receive him.

And now was displayed a new phase of this man's character. The outside world took him to be a rough, uncouth barbarian. Any one who had seen him in Pipa's boudoir would have supposed him an elegant Sybarite.

Reclining on a divan, arrayed in a silken gown and smoking-cap, and languidly drawing perfumed tobacco-smoke through the amber-mouthpiece of a Turkish hookah, or water pipe, while he listened dreamily to the chatter, or perhaps the singing of the sultana-like Pipa, he was really a fine-looking man, hardly recognizable as him we have seen in teamster's garb.

His features were good and his face intelligent, albeit showing traces of unbridled passions; and he dropped from his speech the uncouth dialect which he affected in keeping with the character he wore before the world.

Now one could see that he might be fascinating to women if he chose.

"I am going away, my pet," he said.

"Ah! so soon again?" cried Pipa, and one would have thought her in despair immediately. "You are wearying of me. Say it, if it is so!"

She effected a pretty pout, and looked at him through gathering tears.

"Weary of you!—silly child!" he said, flattered by her seeming dependence upon his smile. "Come here, and I will show you how I weary of you."

She sprang to his side, flinging herself upon the floor, and catching his hand to press her tear-wet face upon it.

"I shall die! I shall die!" she cried passionately. "You will be glad of that, eh?"

"Do you love me so, my Pipa?" he asked, caressing her hair.

He tried to lift her up to kiss her, but she resisted him, hiding her face in his breast, and there sobbing as if not to be comforted.

By and by she permitted him to lift her face to his lips, and then listened to him demurely while he assured her that only pressing business could call him from her side.

After that there was a lingering tenderness, half-reproachful, in her manner toward him; and when he went away, she stood before the door of the ranch and looked after him from under her hand.

But, returned to her boudoir, her manner changed to eager anticipation.

"The fandango! Ah! delight of my soul!" she cried, clapping her hands with child-like glee. "Look you! I can compass it as the bird flies, and none sees where he has been through the air. Concho shall devise how it may best be done. Ah! wise Concho!—foolish Concho! thy vain dream may cost thee thy heart's blood one day!"

And she laughed, pirouetting around the room as she trolled a gay Spanish air.

In the cool of the afternoon she called for her palfrey, and rode forth, attended by a young vaquero, perhaps a year older than herself, whose eyes kindled whenever they rested upon her.

He was in brave attire, with the gayest of silk handkerchiefs wrapped about his head under his sombrero, a zandy serape, a flaunting sash, and spurs as cruel as they were showy.

Pipa, the arch-coquette cast over his person a side glance that sent him to the seventh heaven of beatitude, and made him her devoted slave.

"Concho," she said, "my maid tells me that there is to be a masked fandango at Senor Castilar's ranch."

"Si, Donna Pipa," responded Concho, his voice quivering over her name. "Everybody is to be there for miles around. Never was there such an occasion as this will be."

"Ah!" sighed Pipa, "all may go but me!"

"But why may not Donna Pipa go if she chooses?"

"Would Don Roberto consent?"

Concho remained silent; but he scowled in the most approved Mexican fashion.

"If I but had a devoted cavalier!" sighed Pipa once more—"one as discreet as brave, such as one reads of in old romances."

"Are there none, then, who are devoted to you?" asked Concho, his nostrils dilating with deep, passionate respiration.

"Who would dare all things for my sake?"

"I!—Concho!"

"But you could be wise!—and secret?"

"Try me!"

"Ah! but in case of misadventure? There might be danger. Don Roberto is not a patient man, nor one likely to forgive."

"Am I a coward, think you?"

"But a word from you might ruin me."

"Am I a traitor?"

"Under stress of torture—perhaps death?"

"Senora, I swear never to betray you, though my heart be torn from my body!"

"But for such devotion—"

"A word—a smile—a touch of your hand in kindness!"

"Ah! what are you saying so wildly?"

"Only what my eyes have told you a thousand times!"

"Hush! hush!"

"Senora—"

"I cannot listen to you!"

"Pardon me!"

The youth, led on by her subtle coquetry, had given full rein to his passion. His lips were bloodless; his eyes blazed; his breast heaved; he quivered in every nerve.

Spurring her horse, she rode rapidly forward, but, be it known, not in the direction of her home.

Concho followed, regaining his composure as he best could.

At last, by that subtle change of manner of which she was perfect mistress, she intimated a willingness that he should again ride at her side.

"You do forgive me?" he pleaded.

"On condition."

"Name it. No knight of whom you have ever read dared meet what would daunt me on the road to your favor."

"That you mention this never again."

"Ah!"

Only a sigh. But it spoke volumes of hopeless passion.

"It is agreed between us?" asked Pipa.

"I must submit to whatever you are pleased to impose. You do not expect me to say that it is easy or agreeable."

To this she made no reply.

Presently he spoke again.

"You will go to the fandango?"

She flashed her beautiful eyes round upon him with a look of surprise.

"Against Don Roberto's wishes?—without his knowledge?"

"Since you cannot go *with* them."

Again she was silent.

"Have I ever failed you in anything?" he asked.

"I am not insensible to your past faithfulness," she said, hesitatingly; "but—"

And here she came to a tantalizing pause.

"But I am unworthy the happiness of a chance to reclaim myself in your eyes!" he supplemented, bitterly.

She turned her eyes full upon his face, and spoke deliberately.

"In a matter of such vital moment, I fear to trust one so impulsive as you."

He flushed and paled rapidly.

"I would lay down my life for you!" he pleaded. "Knowing what was at stake—would not that steady me? Ah! senora, trust me!"

After seeming to weigh the matter, she asked: "How could it be accomplished, without the knowledge of any one? An idle word, even without malice, might bring swift retribution on both of us."

"What easier?" cried Concho, now radiant with delight. "Is not Senor Dukes away? A low signal from the darkness, a rope ladder such as bore Romeo to his Juliet—'Are you there?'—'Descend fearlessly!'—and we are away!"

So impassioned was his rendition of this imaginary drama, that Pipa caught the infection. Her cheeks flushed, her eyes flashed, with his.

"But at the fandango?—at the fandango?" she cried, breathlessly.

"Masked, who will recognize you?" he asked. "And we can come away before it is time to uncover."

"And re-enter the house—"

"While all sleep, no wiser—no worse—for your hour of happiness."

"But it is to-night. We have not—ah! *Madre de Dios!*—not three hours of daylight left!"

"Three ages in which love may work his miracles!" cried Concho. "Trust me!—the hour shall not find me a laggard."

"Then away!" cried Pipa, and wheeling their horses, they dashed homeward.

For a week Black-Hoss Ben had been a prey to that divine passion which has turned many a sound sleeper into a moon-gazer. On the night of Demon Dukes's departure and of the masked fandango he sat at his window, gazing across the patio at the room which contained the woman who had filled his soul with a new, strange unrest. He was passing in review his past life with its dark shadows of violence and crime. So far it had rested lightly on his conscience; but since he had known Beatrice he had been

haunted by a long procession of accusing specters that came trooping out of the past.

"To clean the black page, and start anew!" he said to himself for the hundredth time; and with the bitterness of many a man who has riveted the chains of iniquity one by one on his soul, he felt that they could not be shaken off at a moment's notice.

While he sat with a frown of pain on his face, his elbows resting on the window-ledge and his hands clutched in his hair, gazing hopelessly out into the night, he became aware of some one moving on the veranda opposite. At first it was only a black shadow, scarcely distinguishable from the general obscurity in which it moved. A moment later it flitted up the stairway leading to the housetop; and he made out the outlines of a woman's figure.

Ordinarily he would only have supposed it some one restless like himself, seeking the tranquilizing effect of sitting under the calm stars. But the evident stealthiness and agitation of the woman's movements told him that in this case there was something clandestine.

Now by one of those accidents that are constantly happening, it chanced that Pipa had never seen Black-Hoss Ben, who was up and away while rosy sleep yet held her in its embrace, not to "turn in" until long after she was again snugly ensconced beneath her silken coverlet; and indeed she knew nothing of the fate that had overtaken Polo Treviada, nor that he had a successor.

On the other hand, Ben knew all about her, though he had not yet seen her; and at once it flashed across his mind that this was she.

"Eh?" he reflected, "the queen of the harem up to intrigue the moment his Serene Highness's back is turned?"

And slipping from his room, he followed her noiselessly.

He reached the tiled roof, to discover that it was already deserted; a rope ladder hooked over the parapet told him how. Tiptoeing thither, he heard whispering under the walls of the house. It was easy to distinguish sex in the different voices.

"An elopement!" was his first natural conclusion. "Well, will it pay to save that young idiot's life, and win his enmity forever?"

For he already guessed who the cavalier was likely to be.

But just then he heard the lady say:

"Wait! wait! One little moment! My mask is deranged."

"Ah! only a harmless escapade," reflected Ben. "But it will go hard with the boy, if it comes to light. I have a mind to follow them, and see that they keep out of mischief. Poor fools! a dance is to them like sunshine to a butterfly. And it will prove a diversion to me."

He saw them move away to where a horse was tethered out on the prairie. Concho mounted; then Pipa stepped upon his foot, and leaped lightly to the crupper of his horse, and they rode cautiously away.

The watcher smiled, as he fancied that he could almost hear at that distance the thumping of young Concho's heart, as the fair arm of his innamorata clung about his waist, and he imagined the effect of her warm breath fanning his cheek.

"No doubt it's worth the risk," he reflected. "At best our colder Northern natures can but faintly guess the experiences of these children of passion."

Though many, indeed most of the people of the ranch were away to the fandango, it was no difficult thing to get a mask. That was all that was needed, the ordinary dress of the people being sufficiently picturesque to produce a gala effect; and thus equipped, Black-Hoss Ben sallied forth, mounted on his peerless Black Diamond.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FANDANGO.

CASTILAR'S ranch presented as gay a scene as reveler need wish. Outside was a pandemonium of horses and stable-boys, each adding to the excitement of the other; inside was a carnival of human beings gone mad with merriment.

Such a medley of mirth and music, of flying feet and whisking draperies, of love-making and feud-breeding was never seen outside of a Spanish or Mexican fandango. Here some dark-eyed houri shot lightning glances through the eye-holes of her mask, accompanied by a low ripple of taunting laughter; there some fire-eating don gnawed his mustache and let his hand fall on the hilt of his dagger. The popping of corks and clinking of glasses; the Babel of voices, none of them harsh, in gay badinage; the wail of viol, the shriek of fife and flageolet, and the twang of guitar; the shuffling of feet and the click of castanets—all blended in a confusion of sound that was intoxicating. It got into the head, and one laughed with or without reason; it got into the feet, and one danced with a partner if one was to be had, but danced whether or no; it got into the heart, and one was everybody's friend—until some one came between one and the smiles of the prettiest, wittiest, trickiest little mask in the room, and then—"Caramba!"

Black-Hoss Ben left his horse at some little distance, in a chaparral, making him lie down, like a dog. Thus he would wait by the hour, with vigilant ears pricked forward, listening for the well-known whistle; then up and away with the bound of a roe, stopping for nothing until he had reached his master's side.

Entering the house, Black-Hoss Ben poured his libation to Bacchus, and then mingled with the revelers, keeping his eyes and ears open.

It did not take him long to find poor Concho. He had only to be on the lookout for the by turns happiest and most miserable, serenest and savagest, most genial and most jealous man in the room. When, with Pipa now in and now out of his arms, now electrifying him by a touch of her finger-tips and now throwing a kiss at him over her shoulder, they waltzed and pirouetted and balanced and bowed through the intricate coquetry of the dance, he was as mad as a dancing dervish—with far better reason, he it conceded to him; but when another claimed her—and you may believe that she did not waste all of her witcheries on Concho, let him frown never so blackly—then he stood as much as possible apart from the merry-makers, and followed her with his eyes, until, she taking no pains to disturb his meditations, they became unendurable, when he would put himself in her way, and try to win her notice.

She betrayed not a little impatience at his persistence. Black-Hoss Ben managed to hear her whisper:

"Ah! marplot, will you betray me, then? Everybody knows you. See! we are attracting attention. Go! Do not approach me again for an hour!"

"Hey! Senorita, I have found you out!" whispered a passing cavalier in her ear.

"Without doubt," she replied, as gayly. "But you are a seer, then; the more so since you are a total stranger to me."

"We will settle the dispute with a dance?"

"Assuredly."

And away they whirled, leaving thrice unhappy Concho to chew the bitter cud of jealous rage.

To those who are not its victims, such misery is only amusing. Ben passed on. His mood had grown rather somber and out of keeping with the scene, when he was suddenly deluged from behind with perfumed water. An egg-shell charged with this harmless ammunition had been broken on his head.

A ripple of musical laughter followed. He turned quickly, and saw a lady gliding away, but looking over her shoulder. It was such a challenge as he would not have declined, even if he had not recognized Pipa in his fair assailant.

In a moment he was at her side.

"Behold me both captive and captor, and supremely happy in either role," he said, as he drew her seemingly reluctant hand through his arm.

"Ah, senor!" she pleaded, "I have made an error—a grievous error."

"So much the more fortunately for me," he replied. "Do you expect me to sympathize with your chagrin? I am not so magnanimous, I acknowledge freely."

She laughed, in a way that showed that she was not quite in despair.

"But a mistake?" she pleaded.

"Is undoubtedly a mistake," admitted Black-Hoss Ben. "I know of no logic that will confute such a proposition. You see that we are one in sentiment. Let us profit by it. You love dancing, and so do I."

"And this is a charming waltz," she supplemented, laughing at his nonsense talk.

Truth to tell, she had been struck by his appearance, and had taken this way to begin a flirtation with him.

He found her a charming waltzer, indeed a charming companion in every way; and, to put it mildly, he was sufficiently to her taste.

They danced and sipped iced wine, and danced again. Then, for variety, they promenaded in the starlight.

Black-Hoss Ben was well aware that poor Concho glided after them, with his mouth full of Spanish oaths and his hand on his dagger.

If Pipa suspected this, she chatted on and laughed as gayly as ever.

"How happy as captive?" she asked him, reverting to his first speech. "Are chains, then, so pleasant to wear?"

"When they are linked by the hands we love," he replied, in the broad gallantry permissible to the occasion.

"Ah, truly! And as for the captor, one is always happy when one has gratified one's love of power. Is it not so?"

"Unless one is generous enough to remember the poor wretch who is eating his heart out with jealousy in yonder, or perhaps out here," replied Ben, so pointedly, that she started and looked round nervously.

"Let us go in," she said, tremulously.

"Pardon me! I hope I have not startled you?"

"Oh, no! As how?" she asked, innocently.

"Then you will grant me a favor before we return where another may claim you?"

"A favor? To a stranger?"

"To one who has been so unhappy hitherto,

but hopes to make the future redeem the past!"

"Ah, senor!"

"It is but a fair exchange that I ask."

"An exchange?"

And already she began to titter covertly, easily guessing the nature of his plea.

He stopped her where a bar of light fell upon them from the dance-hall.

"Come! You are not wholly without pity. It is face for face."

"Oh, senor!—not for the world!"

She let go his arm and shrunk back a step, startled by his being brought face to face with the thought of revealing her identity.

"Do not doubt that you are under the protection of a gentleman," he said, with a sudden, incisive seriousness that was a pointed, yet perfectly polite rebuke to her momentary lapse of confidence.

She liked him all the better for that prompt maintenance of his dignity. With women, as in the warfare of life generally, he succeeds best, who neither trespasses on the rights of others, nor allows others to trespass on his.

"Assuredly," she said, quickly, returning her hand to his arm. "But I fear that I have given senor some warrant for a less careful observance—"

But he broke in upon her demure humility.

"By the innocent freedom of this season of license? Oh, senora, I beg that you will not believe me capable of such misconstruction."

She was assured again, as the closer, confidential pressure of her hand on his arm conveyed.

"If I have regained your confidence," he went on, "permit me a single suggestion, made with all respect and with an eye single to your well-being."

"A suggestion, senor, which involves my well-being? You speak gravely for so gay an occasion. I confess you surprise—nay, startle me."

"There is no occasion for disquiet. It is only this. Pardon me, if I seem intrusive. But by a little more kindness to Concho, you may escape attracting undesirable attention."

Now she fairly leaped away from him, and stood like an animal at bay.

"Ah! who are you?" she cried. "Concho!" she gasped beneath her breath; and then to him again: "This is a threat!"

And as by instinct her hand moved toward her bosom, where lay hidden the deadly toy that was a perpetual menace to her foes, whoever they might prove to be.

"You forget so soon again," said Black-Hoss Ben, "that I claim to hold myself amenable to that code of honor—"

But she interrupted him with an impetuosity that would not be diverted.

"Do not trifle with me, senor! I am in your power. What would you? Speak!"

"Senora must alter her implied estimate of my character, if she would hear more," said Ben, quietly.

"I do! I do!" she pleaded, now showing signs of breaking down. "But cannot you see that, in total ignorance of who you are—"

"I am one whom any woman may trust implicitly."

"But you withhold your name. I may not see your face. Ah! to be ever haunted by an unknown something—a nothing—a shadow—an invisible menace! Senor, have you no pity?"

She stood with clasped hands, trembling before him.

Black-Hoss Ben removed his mask at once.

"Believe me," he said, earnestly, "I had no such intention. All the world—most of all, you—may know me as Benjamin Hamilton, familiarly called Black-Hoss Ben."

"And your face is as reassuring as your words!" breathed Pipa, her voice vibrating with the thrill that shot through her at the sight of his countenance. "Ah! senor, there is no room for doubt of your generous nature!"

"Let me add," pursued Ben, "since it seems unknown to you, that I am Senor Dukes's overseer, in place of Polo Treviada."

"Ah!"

She gasped with renewed terror, pressing her hand over her heart. All seemed over. She would be betrayed; and what would follow? In that moment of sickening dread she thought of suicide as her only escape.

"That fact," pursued Ben, "need not disquiet you. Believe me, it is my wish to protect you, not to betray you."

She gazed at him breathlessly for a moment; then drawing near and laying her hand on his arm, she said:

"I do believe you. What do you advise? Must I go home immediately?"

"I see no reason why you should," said Ben.

"It was imprudent in the extreme to come here at all; but now that you are here, the matter cannot be made worse by your enjoying yourself until the approach of the unmasking hour."

She immediately laughed again, so volatile was her Southern nature; and cuddling close to his side with a little gurgle of happiness, she entered the dance-hall with him, and away they whirled.

By the time she had her next partner she was the lightest-hearted of the gay throng.

But fate was not yet appeased. During her absence a new-comer had entered the room, with a swagger that bespoke a brutal disregard for the rights or comfort of others.

His dress was dandyish in extravagant contrast of color and richness of material. Velvet and satin of the finest texture were overlaid profusely and almost fantastically with gold buttons and bullion trimming, while at the heels of his boots of Spanish leather rattled gold spurs.

He drank at the bar with a brigandish fling, and addressed the ladies with an insolent freedom that called forth many a muttered curse from other gallants, though none seemed ready to call him to account.

"Ah, little one!" he cried, flicking Pipa familiarly on the shoulder with his glove. "I have not yet been favored by the queen of the fandango. I pray you a round to the honor of Terpsichore."

She turned as if stung.

"Yellow Jack!" she gasped below her breath.

"Ah! I am lost!"

CHAPTER X.

MESTIZO VS. GREASER.

BUT willness usually goes along with timidity for its protection. Her mask preserving her change of color from detection, nothing in Pipa's manner, after the first involuntary start, betrayed her dismay.

She knew him too well to offend him by showing resentment of his familiarity; so, canting her head pertly for a sidelong glance up into his face, she accepted his arm with affected gayety, though every drop of blood in her body seemed turned to ice.

It was plain that Yellow Jack's fancy was greatly taken; for he resorted to every means to induce her to speak, her refusal only piquing his curiosity the more.

When she had danced with him, he showed no disposition to quit her society, but instead redoubled his protestations of ravishment with her grace, and importuned her to disclose the beauty hidden behind her envious mask.

What frightened her the more, was the discovery that he was so generally feared that no one dared to enter into competition with him for her favor. Though she had had partners in abundance before, now all stood aloof.

What if it should please him to persist in this monopoly until the hour for unmasking? Concho would be the last one to look to for interposition.

"Oh, holy Virgin! I am lost, if thou dost not take pity on me!" was her distracted prayer.

Her second thought was:

"Senor Hommeelone! Ah! dear Mother of God! if I have ever done aught to please thee, move him to rescue me in this my hour of peril!"

She gazed about in quest of him. He was standing apart from the revelers, against the wall, with folded arms, his attitude that of moody abstraction, seeing without noting what passed before him.

In truth, his thoughts were far from that gay scene. He stood in the shadow of his past life, and gazed with despairing eyes on his hopeless love for the woman who lay yonder, perhaps on a tearful pillow, mourning her irreparable loss—a loss for which he might not hope to console her.

Was it through the prompting of powers that escape the perception of our coarse sense, or only because it chanced at that moment that the bitterness of his thoughts goaded him to seek distraction by mingling again with the throng of thoughtless humanity?

From what cause, soever, while Pipa's whole soul went out to him in a cry for help, he suddenly started forward and plunged into the stream of promenaders as an eager swimmer breasts the tide.

Although he was so absorbed as to have quite forgotten her, Pipa by a little management succeeded in passing near him. As she did so, she plucked his sleeve, and whispered so that only he heard her, a single word:

"Socorro!" (help).

Detecting her slight hesitation, Yellow Jack turned; but my lady bent to arrange some trifle of ornament on her dress so naturally that he was cleverly hoodwinked—as who of us has not been on occasion by the pretty dears?

The music at this moment striking up a mad galop, away he snatched her like a whirlwind, giving her no time to discover whether she had made herself understood or not.

With the insolence that was characteristic of him, he held her too closely in his embrace, the pressure of his arm about her waist feeling to her like the coil of a serpent; yet she dared not betray her repugnance.

"Ah, little one!" he cried, when, having spun her round the room until she was dizzy and faint, he paused to get his own breath, "if the gods have given you beauty equal to your grace, they have been good to you indeed!"

And so much was Pipa a woman—and above all, a Spanish woman—that through all her fear and disgust she could feel a thrill of tri-

umph at this compliment, the sincerity of which was attested by the tone in which it was uttered.

"*Por Dios!*" he cried, smacking his lips. "these vagabonds must serve us with rare wine after so rare a dance. They tell me this dog of a Castilar has some *canario*"—a kind of wine—"that ripened on a southern slope in Paradise, and was wrung by Bacchus into the chalice of the gods, held for him by rosy fingered Hebe—if one can but force him to fetch it to the light of day. And fetch it he shall! for do I not bring Hebe's peer to its drinking?"

He led her into the midst of the chattering throng that was sipping anise-seed, curacao and canario, and munching sweet cakes and bonbons.

"Hey! mine host," he cried boisterously, "a chalice of your fabled *canario* for one who has stolen from Olympus to honor your feast in disguise!"

Don Hilario Castilar, in whose veins, through a bar sinister, coursed the blue blood of royalty—howbeit he was content to lord it over so poor a realm as a *posada*, or inn, on the Santa Fe trail, where he counted it a virtue to fleece the hated *Americanos* however and whenever possible, while cringing to them with spaniel-like servility—Senor Castilar smiled his most insinuating smile and made such obeisance as he seldom vouchsafed to any one of less dignity than an alcalde.

"*Excelexza*, at your service!" he murmured, in liquid accents, "and to the most noble lady the homage beauty claims from us all! What say you?—*canario*? Hush, my Juan!—thou seest I recognize thee;—tell it not to these sots, who would give me not a moment's peace of my life while it lasted; but stands not the decanter in thine own corner?"

And ducking down under his bar, he made a great parade of reaching far under and moving several bottles, to get at the one he desired.

But Yellow Jack shouted out to him roughly:

"Hallo, you canting vagabond!—none of that! Do you take me for a lout who don't know the difference between vinegar-and-water and wine? Down into the cellar with you, and fetch me the only brand you have that is fit for a gentlemen's drinking! A gentleman!" he repeated, remembering his gallantry. "Did I not tell you that I had one of the gods with me? While dancing I thought it Terpsichore; but come to look her over, I'll swear that it is none other than Venus, most beautiful of the celestials!"

During this fanfaronade Senor Castilar had reappeared from under his bar, the insinuating smirk on his oily face fading, like dissolving views, into a look of virtuous protest. Up went his hands—the decanter in one of them and a couple of slender-stemmed wine-glasses in the other—and up went his eyes to the ceiling.

"*Ay Dios!*" he cried, "you hear him, the blasphemer! *Vinegar-and-water!* Do I live? Am I Hilario Castilar? Such wine as ne'er ripened in an Andalusian sun!"

"Cheese it, Castilar, you perfidious old liar!" was Yellow Jack's insolent interruption. "I know you root and branch. Down into the cellar you go—"

"But listen then a little, my Juan! Ah, Mother of God! what shall I say? Has it the bead, eh? It is mellow, eh? Twenty years—no more, no less. *Si*, it is so! By all the blessed saints I swear to thee—"

"Down into the cellar—"

"*Mira!*" [behold] shouted the Spaniard, excitedly holding the decanter up to the light. "A drop—holy Mother! one little drop—to wet but the tip of thy tongue!"

And as if his very life depended upon his expedition, as well as upon his success in persuading his obdurate guest, he clinked the glasses down on the bar, reckless of the danger of snapping their fragile stems, and poured a brimming glass, with such precipitancy that one looked to see as much spilled over the bar as went into the vessel, yet with such skill that not a drop was lost.

"For the love of God!" he pleaded, "one drop—one little drop—one sweet globule of liquid heaven!"

"You infernal Greaser!" shouted Yellow Jack, forgetful that the lady at his elbow was a compatriot of the man he was reviling, "do you want me to ram the whole outfit—decanter, glasses, vinegar and all—down your throat? I tell you I won't have it! It is vinegar, and confounded bad vinegar at that; and curse me if you sha'n't own to it!"

And drawing an ivory-hilted bowie-knife he brought it down upon the bar with such force that its point penetrated at least an inch into the wood, while the glasses jingled with the shock.

CHAPTER XI.

BLACK-HOSS BEN AT BAY.

YELLOW JACK's loud voice had already attracted the attention of those near; his insulting language had caused many an eye to flash and teeth to be ground in silent rage; and now, at the display of arms, women screamed and clung to their escorts, and men started to their feet and let their hands fall on ready weapons.

Senor Castilar gazed at the knife as it stood quivering in the wood, as if fascinated.

Yellow Jack was nothing disturbed by the hostility he had aroused.

"Well," he persisted, "what is it—wine or vinegar?"

Senor Castilar looked from the knife to the man, and read his determination in his eye. His own eyes contracted with a murderous, though impotent hate; his face took on the color of putty; his thin and now bloodless lips writhed apart in a smile that suggested the grin of a snarling hyena. In a voice the inflections of which undulated like the contortions of a serpent, he answered:

"As *Excelexza* hath said, so it is. It is vinegar!"

"And deuced bad vinegar!"

"Most execrable vinegar!"

"Diluted with water—*ditch-water*, by all the saints in the calendar! Make it *ditch-water*!"

"*Ditch-water* most foul! *Por Dios!* vinegar and ooings of the bog!"

But in his riot of insolence Yellow Jack was not yet done. With a brutal laugh he added:

"And fit only for the drinking of a Greaser! Ha! ha! ha! ha! Come! go the whole figure! Fit only for a Greaser!"

The victim of this cruel gibe smiled a sickly smile—a smile that meant that, if he ever got a chance to strike his tormentor in the back on some dark night, he would square accounts with him for this humiliation.

"Fit not for the drinking of a gentleman," he said. "Fit only for the despised Greaser!"

Yellow Jack turned to the throng of infuriated Mexicans, who were execrating under their breath the *mestizo*—one whose mother is an Indian—who had so wantonly insulted them all.

"You hear him?" he cried, laughing in their faces.

Only low rumbles of fury were returned.

At this point an assistant pulled Senor Castilar's sleeve. A low, earnest consultation followed, in which mine host exalted his hands and eyebrows, puckered up his lips and exclaimed softly, as if only to his servant, yet loud enough for Yellow Jack to hear:

"Ah! so? Holy Mother, it is a miracle!"

And clapping the other on the shoulder and hustling him off:

"Run, my Victor! Let not the stairs feel the weight of thy flying feet!"

Then he turned to Jack with a smile as apologetic as if the outrage just committed had never occurred.

"Ah, Don Juan!" he cried, "what do we not owe to my faithful Victor? He has just reminded me—Mother of God, that I should have forgotten it—that a bottle—a single bottle of such wine as passed not the lips of the gods—wine that, two bottles—but two—death to my soul if there was the hundredth part more than two!—wine that was given to my father on his wedding day, and one broken by his bride—given by the Governor of Chihuahua, Don Gualterio Faria-y-Souza, a gallant gentleman, a soldier who knew not fear, a defender of our most holy religion, and a faithful subject of His Royal Majesty—"

"Aw!" yawned Yellow Jack, "what in Heaven's name is all this about? What are your governor, your father and your religion to me?"

"But the wine, my Juan—the remaining bottle—"

"Ah! that's something to the purpose. Let us hear about the wine."

"Forty years—Don Gualterio swore it on the hilt of his sword, as a true knight—add that to my own age, which is seven-and-thirty, and you have—ah, *Cristo!* can it be so?—in effect, fourscore! This I give to thee, that I thought to send to Padre Constancio, the faithful servant of our holy church, with which to celebrate the nativity of the ever blessed Virgin."

"A confounded ill road for good wine to go," cried Jack. "But come, sweetheart, are not we to have the wine I promised you?"

He turned, to find that during his quarrel the lady, to impress whom with his prowess all this bravado had been indulged in, had taken advantage of his preoccupation to slip away.

Others had noticed this, and only their masks hid their satisfaction.

Tearing off his own mask, that his view might be unobstructed, he glared around.

Among the number of high-back combs that he had to choose from, only one was between the head of its wearer and his eye; and that was receding rapidly, the lady's manner betraying extreme agitation, though her escort walked with a firm step that betokened one little familiar with fear.

With a roar that would have done credit to an enraged bull, Yellow Jack set out in pursuit, clearing a way through the crowd like the path of a whirlwind.

He had caught his bowie from where it stood erect on the bar, and such was the terror inspired by his blood-shot eyes, his passion-empurpled face and the glittering weapon, that men fled from before him pell-mell, along with shrieking women.

As he went he aspirated an incisive sound which was something between the trill of a

cicada and the hiss of a serpent. That this was a signal to his followers quickly appeared; for in response several men sprung before the door with drawn weapons, cutting off Black-Hoss Ben's retreat.

Pipa, who was so shaken by fear that it seemed as if her limbs would sink under her, glanced back over her shoulder and saw him coming.

"Oh! most holy Virgin preserve us!" she shrieked. "He is upon us, and will slay both!"

Black-Hoss Ben saw that he was surrounded; but, as compared with the man who was following him with murder in his heart and death in his hand, he rightly esteemed those who stood before the door as so many coyotes. Of them he had little fear; but Yellow Jack was a man not to be trifled with.

Quickly he bent so as to bring his lips close to Pipa's ear.

"Have no fear;—I will deliver you. Trust me, and keep close to me," he said, in a low voice, of such cool, confident strength that some of his courage seemed infused into her, thrilling along like fine arrows of fire.

Through all the wild vicissitudes of her eventful life, never had her intense nature experienced such a moment of exaltation as when he swept her round behind him and faced the avenger.

"He will conquer!" she cried to her madly-leaping heart. "He? Who shall stand against him? He is a god! Ah! soul of my soul, how I love him! Shall I prove unworthy of him? Would that I had the blood of the Borgias coursing like liquid fire through my veins! But I am of a race that breeds no cravens! May I not emulate them?"

And plucking her dagger from her bosom, she stood ready to aid him with a deadly blow, if chance offered.

As he came to where another leap would precipitate him upon his intended victim, the *mestizo* drew back his bowie until it gleamed in the lamp-light above his head.

"Die, you accursed hound!" he grated between his teeth.

And throwing the whole energy of his powerful frame into the effort, he hurled himself upon his enemy.

Standing like a tower of rock, Black-Hoss Ben received the whole force of the charge. It never phased his superb muscles. They yielded like spring steel; and the recoil was like that of a Damascus blade.

His left hand received the wrist of the hand that held the murderous bowie; and Yellow Jack felt as if an iron clamp had been sprung upon that member, wringing it until it seemed as if he could trace the pain, as it leaped along his nerves of sense, clear to the brain—to be followed by the weakness and numbness of paralysis. His right hand—that powerful right which in a blow fell like a thunderbolt—caught the braggart by his sash. Then came a mighty contraction of the muscles that stood out like ribbed steel; and Yellow Jack was plucked up from his feet, and hurled to the floor with a crash that shook the house to its foundation stones!

Empty-handed Black-Hoss Ben now turned upon the men who blocked the doorway.

"Away!" he shouted with an imperious wave of his arm, and dragging Pipa after him by the wrist, strode boldly toward them.

But he made the mistake of assuming that they were all Mexicans.

Among their number was a cowboy who hailed the smell of burning powder as a war-horse snuffs the battle-smoke. His coolness and firmness held the others to their post, though they shook in their shoes.

"Hold on, boss!" he said. "Ye're a mighty good man; but ye ain't a-shootin' of Gopher Charley, ye understand, like a speckled hen."

He leveled the tube of his revolver at our hero's forehead on a line with his eyebrows, yet held his fire, as a brave man always does to the last extreme.

Black-Hoss Ben knew "the best in the pack" when he saw it; and Gopher Charley certainly now held that card. To advance was to rush straight upon death; to attempt to draw a weapon was equally hazardous; yet there was no time for parley. Yellow Jack, though stunned by his heavy fall, might recover and spring to his feet at any moment.

There are times when Fortune deserts her favorites like a fickle coquette; and Black-Hoss Ben began to fear that for once his star of destiny was under an eclipse.

CHAPTER XII.

YELLOW JACK DOWN.

BUT, like the same coquette, when she has shown them their dependence on her smiles, she often comes unexpectedly to the rescue at the very last moment; and so it was in this case.

If Concho had chafed at Black-Hoss Ben's successful rivalry, he had been wild with fear from the time that Yellow Jack had appeared upon the scene. If he made no open attempt to rescue the lady, it was only because his courage was not equal to his loyalty.

It is to be credited to the genuineness of his

love for her—however faulty in other respects—that, when he saw Black-Hoss Ben go to her aid, he could smother his jealousy at the thought that a rival should fill his place at such a moment, and hold himself in readiness to second his efforts in any way that did not bring him directly under Yellow Jack's dreaded resentment.

The crisis in Black-Hoss Ben's fortunes, in that desperate moment when he stood at bay, offered just the opportunity he sought; and Concho had the wit to seize upon it.

"The lights! the lights!" he shouted—a cry the significance of which is instantly apprehended in a Spanish fandango, where it is not infrequently found expedient to quench some suddenly up-blazing feud by casting the mantle of darkness around the contestants.

At this moment one of Yellow Jack's Mexican satellites, seeing a chance for a little cheap buncombe under cover of Gopher Charley's command of the situation, fired his revolver at Black-Hoss Ben; but our hero happening to turn his stern eyes upon him so disconcerted him that his bullet flew wide, finding its billet, however, in the body of a luckless spectator.

His cry of anguish spread a general panic; and those nearest the lights leaped to them and extinguished them in a twinkling.

A general pell-mell exodus by windows and doors followed, in which the distinction of friend and foe was necessarily obliterated.

Gopher Charley had to forego his advantage, to his not slight chagrin.

In a twinkling Black-Hoss Ben saw his chance; and catching Pipa up in his arms, he bounded to an open window and set her through it, to himself follow without one false motion.

Yellow Jack's wits were not long wool-gathering. From the shock in which it seemed as if Heaven and earth smote together, he woke to find himself being trod under foot by the mad mob.

To gather himself up; to hurl aside some one—he cared not who—that dashed against him; to tear a path through shrieking women and cursing men to the door—was the work of an instant.

Out in the starlit night, in that clime of pure air, objects could be seen with comparative distinctness. Those who first gained the open saw a man rushing away from the house with a woman in his arms—heard a shrill whistle that pierced the still air like the thrill of a cicada—saw a horse as black as the raven's wing, saddleless, bridleless, come bounding from a neighboring chaparral toward the fugitives, halt and wheel, ready for his burden and instant flight—saw the man lift the woman to the withers of this monarch of his kind, and with the agility of a circus-rider leap to a seat on his back behind her; then:

"Away, my brave steed!"

And the shadows cleft the night like phantoms winged for earthly flight.

Foaming at the mouth with rage, Yellow Jack called to his followers:

"After them! after them! Death of my soul! shall they be allowed to escape? A hundred Spanish dollars to the man who brings me his heart to feed upon! Ah, stocks! stones! lagging curs! accursed hounds! a thousand devils of death and fury! Aid me now, ye fiends of darkness, and I will serve you forever!"

And firing useless shots as he ran, the *mestizo*, crazed with rage, rushed after the fugitives on foot.

To the superstitious Mexicans everything pointed to the supernatural.

"It is the Prince of Darkness!" they cried, crossing themselves. "Did you observe him? He stood with folded arms against the wall, like Mephistopheles!"

"My blood ran cold when he but turned his baleful glance upon me! Ah! the saints forefend that I fall a victim to the evil eye!"

"And she!"

"Ah, she—*Virgen santissima*!—was of the grace and beauty that belongs not to this world!"

"It was a temptation to Yellow Jack for his wickedness. Do not you think so?"

"Si, comrade. The good God permits such things, without doubt."

"Never was mortal so abandoned as the *mestizo*."

"*Por Dios*! it is in the blood!"

"And you heard his apostrophe? Ah! the saints deliver us from one so wicked!"

"Sell himself to the devil? My faith! it is a bagatelle to such as he!"

"He should have known that it was none other that he was so impious as to attempt to contend with! *Caspita*! the shock was such as well might have annihilated him!"

"But he is mad now, without doubt."

"And—*santo Dios*!—possessed of the devil forevermore!"

"It is in the writings of the fathers that he is forever insane who has felt the touch of the unholy one."

"So we are rid of Yellow Jack? Bravo! there is something in that, senores!"

"But he has followed the phantoms. No doubt it was to lead him away thus that they came at all."

"But how unfortunate for Don Hilario, meanwhile! So good a fellow, too!"

"Let not that trouble thee, my Hernando. Padre Constancio, who is a particular friend of Don Hilario, will sprinkle the house with holy water from threshold to house-top."

"But at what expense to the Church! *Diablo*! to be out of pocket that a dog of a *mestizo* may be—"

"Hush, impious one! Thy sacrilegious jest may bring thee that which will make thee howl for forgiveness."

"Without doubt," pursued the incorrigible joker, gravely, as on second thought, "he can give the good padre the wine that Yellow Jack did not stay to enjoy."

"Hey, senores!" here broke in one who, having faith sufficient to move mountains, thought that he had made a clever discovery, "is it not that the devil was sent to interfere, that the good padre might not be robbed of his cordial?—*por Dios*!"

"Good! good!" cried Hernando, patting the last speaker on the shoulder. "Say you, senores, hath not our little Bernardo the wisdom of a schoolman? But tell me, thou sapient one, is it lawful for the padre to profit by the interposition of the Father of Lies?"

At this the laugh went round at the expense of honest Bernardo, who replied, with a shrug:—

"My Hernando, thy wit hath point enough; but I would not stand in thy shoes and make light of these sacred mysteries—no! scarcely sooner than in those of Yellow Jack himself!"

"Out upon thee, fellow!" laughed the joker, who was a giant compared with the bantling whom he had made the target of his badinage, "thou couldst not get thy great toe into one of my shoes!"

So at a quip these children of impulse returned to their happy-go-lucky way of taking life.

Of Yellow Jack's followers Gopher Charley was by far the most cool and fertile of resource. The moment he found himself in the dark, and so virtually disarmed, he shouted:—

"Follow me! Out of doors! Surround the house!"

And he himself cleared the doorway at a bound.

But it was unfortunate for his enterprise that there was but one of him to several exits to the house, distributed around its various sides, among which he could form no idea of Black-Hoss Ben's choice.

As to the Mexicans, a healthy regard for Black-Hoss Ben's prowess considerably abated their zeal, so that they did more stumbling against each other than surrounding.

By this means, as we know, our hero got the start of his foes.

And here again Gopher Charley had a chance to display his presence of mind. Instead of a useless pursuit on foot, he called his men to follow him, and sprung to where the horses were hitched.

In a twinkling he had them in the saddle, and they soon overhauled their leader and gave him a mount.

But by this time the trail was cold.

Of course his prudent followers let Yellow Jack be the first to propose to abandon it, which he did with no lack of profanity.

Returning to the scene of his overthrow, to the confusion of those who had comfortably disposed of him to "Auld Hornie," he found the lamps relighted and the revel again in full course, as if no interruption had occurred.

Not at all flattered by this evidence of the popular indifference to his concerns, he proceeded to bully the crowd into telling him to whom he was indebted for his recent humiliation.

But those who knew, having Black-Hoss Ben in quite as great respect as Yellow Jack, held their peace; and those who knew not to the contrary, keeping still to the opinion that it could be none other than the arch-enemy of man, were loth, as may well be imagined, for prudential reasons, to venture such a suggestion to Yellow Jack himself.

Disgusted with his want of success, and unable to find an excuse for venting his choler by picking a quarrel where none dared resent his insults, he mounted his men and, instead of taking the road to the mountains which Black-Hoss Ben had chosen, set out by the most direct route to Demon Dukes's ranch.

This was mere chance, since he had no suspicion that he might there intercept his enemy; but if he got there first, it would be just as unfortunate for our hero as if it had all been advisedly planned.

CHAPTER XIII.

BLACK-HOSS BEN VS. CUPID.

MEANWHILE Black Diamond was coursing away like the wind—not taking the direct route home, since it was Black-Hoss Ben's purpose to mislead the inquisitive, if possible. At the same time he must reach the ranch and have Pipa snugly ensconced in her room before any chance arrival; or all the advantage gained by the speed of his peerless horse would be lost. Consequently, having started out on the road leading to the mountains, he abandoned it at the first point where the nature of the ground

would not leave too broad a trail, and took a clean dash across the level plateau.

To Pipa all this was like a leaf out of one of her favorite romances—those old Spanish tales of knight errantry, full of heart-stirring adventure prompted by passionate love, mad jealousy, ruthless revenge and that gallantry which found its reward in woman's smile and a gay scarf as a *gage d'amour*—a pledge of love.

The delightful intrigue which eluded the vigilance of such a husband as Demon Dukes; the gratification of vanity and feminine spite in becoming the acknowledged belle of the fandango, and leading a troop of jostling gallants in her train, to the chagrin of her distanced rivals, culminating in the triumph of being the occasion of a deadly encounter between two such men as Black-Hoss Ben and Yellow Jack; then this mad race for life and—as she put it—honor, which was only another name for “imprudences” undetected—ah! what risk was too great for such happiness?

And Black-Hoss Ben! Where was ever such courtly gallantry, such kingly courage, such irresistible energy?

His strong arms infolded her; his deep chest rose and fell against hers. In that haven of security what danger could reach her? His warm breath, deep-drawn from the chamber that held his mighty heart, blew across her cheek. It was intoxication to her senses.

He was silent—sternly silent, she put it, as became a hero. She did not presume to intrude her woman's trivialities upon the terrible thoughts that, according to her fancy, swayed his breast. It was enough to worship him and his noble beast that was worthy of so princely a master, while they strained every muscle, employed every faculty, and risked all, even to life itself, in her behoof.

That she had inspired Black-Hoss Ben with a passion equal to her own, it never occurred to her to doubt. Why else had he followed her to the fandango? Evidently, being in her husband's employ, he had seen her, unseen by her. Why else had he concerned himself to warn her of the danger of goading Concho to too conspicuous jealousy? That he himself exhibited no jealousy of Concho or any other, went for nothing. These *Americanos* were all men of stern, swift action, not words—taciturn, almost morose, as compared with her volatile countrymen. Why else had he responded so promptly to her call for help, snatching her from under the very paw of the lion that no one else dared so much as face? Why else was he now bearing her with the fleetness of the wind back to her home, that she might regain the shelter of her husband's roof undiscovered?—he who might curry favor with his employer by betraying her!

“Ah! he is the prince of my dreams!” she said to her heart. “He bears my soul captive on his fleet steed! Before such as he even Don Roberto must droop his plumes. When, when will he bear me thus away from Don Roberto? I will follow him! Ah! Mother of God! whenever—wherever he will!”

If she had known Black-Hoss Ben's thoughts at that moment!

He was saying to himself:

“If it were but my peerless Beatrice!—and I bearing her away from this den of infamy!—away to some mountain paradise where none might spy out and covet my happiness!”

And unconsciously he tightened his clasp upon Pipa, causing her heart to leap with assurance that she was beloved.

Knowing nothing of the other's state of mind, neither guessed the evil that was to spring from this misunderstanding.

So they skimmed over the prairie until the hacienda loomed into view, silent and lone in the midst of the level waste.

Approaching it from the leeward side, that his horse might not be scented by any wakeful animal, since an untimely neigh might open ears that it were better to leave unopened in kindly slumber. Black-Hoss Ben stopped before the muffled thud of Black Diamond's hoofs could be heard from the ranch stables, dismounted and made his horse lie down.

Then taking Pipa's hand, he said hurriedly: “Come, senora! we have no time to lose. It will be lucky for us if we find no one stirring.”

“Thanks, a thousand thanks, most noble Senor Hom—Hom—”

She broke off with a little laugh as she nestled her hand confidentially in his. Then speaking in English, she went on, archly:

“How you call in Angleese? I can note eet spick! Hom-meel-tone, eh?”

And, aware of her defective pronunciation, she laughed in a way that would have bewitched an anchorite, and that certainly would have carried Black-Hoss Ben, who was no ascetic, by storm, but, for the fact that he was already so deeply in love with another.

As it was, he looked into the eyes that he could see flash in the starlight, and smiling pleasantly, yet with no perturbation of the heart, replied:

“Donna Pipa speaks the harsh tongue of the Saxon with such charming grace that it comes from her lips almost as musically as her own liquid Spanish.”

“Ah! the most gallant senor has of an olden knight the—the—”

She paused, looked at him with her head canted sidewise with bird-like grace, and abandoning her Spanish, made one more venture on the perilous sea of that speech which no foreigner ever mastered without a special dispensation of Providence!

“Ze—ze blar-nee?”

Black-Hoss Ben's politeness was not equal to the tax laid upon it by the arch lifting of her brows and shoulders, following the questioning inflection of her voice, and he laughed.

As light-heartedly, Pipa laughed with him.

“Hush! hush!” he whispered. “We shall be overheard!”

“What have I said?” she asked;—“that senor is a most accomplished flatterer.”

This in Spanish, and again in the despair of the gods:

“I spick note ze Angleese vell—eh? I have of you—you—ah—of ze *Americanos*, hear zat, —blar-nee. Eet iss note raight, eh?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Ben. “It has the sanction of very ancient authority; but it is rather more truthful than people usually are to each other in polite society. But we are too near the house—”

“Wait!”

She interrupted him excitedly and detaining him by the arm.

“You name! How you spick dat? Hom-meel-tone—no?”

She stood before him panting with eagerness—so close that, with her head thrown back so that she could look into his face, her breath fanned his cheek.

A wooden man could not have mistaken the significance of this personal interest.

The knowledge that this woman was making love to him penetrated Black-Hoss Ben's preoccupation; and, whatever might have been his reception of it a fortnight ago, to the credit of his heart, and in evidence of the strength and purity of his love for Beatrice, he it said, that now it affected him disagreeably.

“There is not time for you to learn to pronounce Hamilton,” he replied, somewhat coldly. “It is difficult.”

She started. His tone jarred upon her sensitive ear. But another thought obliterated the half-formed impression, and sent her quick wit on the wrong track, just when it trembled on the eve of discovery.

“Ah, *Santissima Maria!* to be so dull of comprehension! Who would have thought it of him?—and he so quick of wit in all else! His name?” with a shrug. “My faith! are there then only names in the world?”

And my lady felt that she had serious cause for complaint in Black-Hoss Ben's stupidity.

All this passed through her mind at a flash; and after a pretty little pout which was lost in the darkness, she instantly resumed her sprightliness.

“Hameeltonn!—eh?” she repeated quickly, with coquettish defiance.

Then, after a little laugh under her breath, she went on with mock contrition:

“Ah, pardon, senor! But you will teach me? Is it not so?”

And returning to the assault on our Saxon stronghold:

“Ah, belief me, I love ze *Angle-e-ese!*”

She dwelt on the last syllable in a tone that was a caress; then quickly resumed in Spanish:

“You will teach me to pronounce your name?”

And again back to English:

“Eet iss so beauteefool—eh?”

How was Black-Hoss Ben to get out of this dilemma, with that hand as light as a snowflake on his arm—those eyes beaming up into his face as brightly as the stars that seemed to twinkle with merriment at the fix he was in—that voice breathing over and over again, as softly as zephyrs sighing in the reeds:

“Hameeltonn! Hameeltonn!”

Fate had pity on him, and “let him out.”

He heard what justified a summary disposal of her awkward question.

“Hush! hush!” he whispered. “Some one is coming! I fear we have delayed too long.”

It was as he said. A horseman came dashing along the road at a breakneck pace. It would be impossible for them to reach the house, not to mention getting Pipa up the rope-ladder and over the parapet of the *azotea* (roof), before he was upon them.

“Let him pass,” whispered Pipa, who, nothing loth to enjoy Black-Hoss Ben's society, did not realize as vividly as did he the possible cost of such hazardous indulgence.

“Impossible!” replied our hero. “He will arouse the house, and then we shall be lost.”

She spoke, without an instant's hesitation, the thought that flashed through her mind:

“At worst, we might fly together.”

Had it been polite to be equally frank, Black-Hoss Ben might have replied:

“Excuse me!”

But he kept that sarcasm to himself and, instead, whispered:

“Remain here until I return. Do not move whatever happens.”

But she caught his arm.

“Oh, Mother of God! you will leave me?”

“For but a moment; it is unavoidable; do not detain me.”

He loosened her clinging hands with a quick, decided, yet gentle motion, which left her breathless with a sense of his power and perfectly submissive to his will, yet not feeling that he had been harsh.

Then he crept away toward the road to intercept the approaching horseman, loosening his sash as he went.

Pipa was left alone in the darkness, and like a veritable coward crouched with her face to the ground, throwing her mantilla over her head, and appealing to the saints for protection with a zeal unknown to her ordinary devotions.

Wholly unaware of the reception that awaited him, on came the horseman, the thud of his horse's flying hoofs the only sound that broke the dead silence of the night.

CHAPTER XIV.

“A CLOSE SHAVE.”

THE equestrian whose coming was so untimely was—who but our friend Concho?

He had bailed Black-Hoss Ben as a deliverer when he saw him interpose in Pipa's behalf; but he had not counted on his making off with her altogether. At that startling *dénouement* he was in despair.

Who was this bold adventurer who bore women away on his horse like a mountain bandit? And Pipa had not screamed as if she were an unwilling captive. How had he bewitched her in the short period of their association?—for Concho's jealousy prompted him to believe that every gallant on whom she smiled had made conquest of her heart.

But then came the thought that one of his address and marvelous strength might have held his hand over her mouth, counting her feeble resistance as nothing.

Was it an elopement, or an abduction? Pipa's fate would be the same in either case, save for her personal feeling. But Concho viewed the matter principally in its bearing on himself.

If she had been torn from him by a ruthless rover who broke her heart while he left her lover in despair, he would rend his hair, upbraid fate, swear deathless vengeance that could be appeased only by the blood of his wronger, and do divers and sundry other things of a melodramatic character; every thing, in fact, save take active steps for her rescue.

But if she had yielded her honor and his love to a more favored suitor, then—ah! then there was nothing left but to find consolation on the point of his dagger, or in those subtle drugs that alchemy has given to hopeless love and life-weariness!

Not that Concho would have stabbed himself or taken poison; but he would have thought about it and planned it all out in the most dramatic fashion, and lived in an atmosphere of imaginary blood and deadly nightshade until he lost his heart anew to another pair of black eyes and laughter-loving lips.

It did not occur to him that there might be another aspect to the case until he heard a fellow vaquero mention the name of Black-Hoss Ben; but then the truth came to him in a flash, bringing with it the proper course of action to place himself before Pipa in the best light possible under the circumstances.

“I will swear to her that, driven to despair by her coquetry, I had rushed out into the night where I might not see the smiles she lavished on others. Ah, death of my soul! it was the last flout of fate that had already made a mock at my love!”

So, not scrupling to lie to her, as perhaps few lovers would, he sprang to his horse, and gave him rein and spur without mercy as he dashed along the road taken a little later by Yellow Jack and his men.

“Away! away, lazybones!” he cried to his horse. “Snail! sluggard! hast thou no life, then? *Caramba!* thou dost make head backwards! Must I belabor thee with a cudgel, like thy long-eared cousin of unmusical voice? Hah! thou disgrace to horse flesh, the spur is too much honor for thee! *Maldita!* he will have her housed ere thou hast brought me in sight of the hacienda! And am I not to be there to behold their parting? He is to assist her up the ladder of my making! He is to feel the divine pressure of her hand—to receive her sigh, as words fail to express the debt she owes to his courage—haply to bear away some more tangible token of her gratitude! A thousand million furies! *Caramba! Carajo! Santo Dios! Malditissima!* Hah! blood and fiends, thou bound! shall I slay thee, then? Away! away!”

Mad with pain and terrified with the hoarse cries of his passion-distraught rider, the horse laid his ears flat and fairly ran away; but the road being perfectly level and straight, there was no danger so long as he did not stumble or fall exhausted.

He was very near this point when he reached the spot where Black-Hoss Ben lay in wait for him.

Holding the success of his effort to shield Pipa from detection before every thing short of

taking human life, our hero crept to the road, unwinding a lasso that he always carried coiled beneath his sash.

As the horse came opposite to him he made a cast for his fore foot.

The next instant horse and rider rolled in the dust.

The horse struggled ineffectually to regain his feet. A broken leg rendered him unable to rise. He sunk back to the earth, moaning with pain.

The man lay without motion or sign of consciousness.

"It is just possible that I have broken his neck," reflected Black-Hoss Ben; and so powerful is national prejudice that he did not feel the same lively concern that he would have experienced had it been other than a "Greaser."

"Poor devil!" he went on, "I will give him the benefit of the doubt, whoever he is, and not leave him to be trampled under foot by the next comers. But that's all I'll have time to do for him."

And springing to the side of the prostrate man, he hurriedly dragged him out of the road, without, however, stopping to examine into his condition, or to ascertain who he might be.

"I'll know all that to-morrow, and no good would come of my knowing it to-night," would have been his reflection, had he thought anything about it, which, truth to tell, he did not.

Instead, he sprung to the side of the panting and moaning horse, and detached his lasso from the broken leg.

"I'd like to put you out of your misery, old fellow," he said, in a tone which showed that his sympathy for the animal sprung more quickly and naturally than for the man; "but it won't do to give this the appearance of anything other than an accidental fall. That merciless devil has ridden you almost to death. If he comes off with a whole neck, I shall not be half-sorry that I gave him a tumble, as some requital for his cruelty to you."

Then hastily winding his lasso over hand and elbow as he ran, he hurried back to where he had left Pipa.

Only his Indian-like sense of locality enabled him to find her.

Instead of being on the lookout for him, she lay, as we have described, cowering close to the ground, with her mantilla over her head, shivering with dread—so strange a compound of boldness and cowardice was this creature of impulse.

At the sound of his approaching footsteps she shut her eyes tightly and covered her ears with her hands, feeling a hysterical impulse to scream; and only when, failing to discover her, he called to her guardedly, did she recognize his voice, and spring up almost under his very feet.

"Ah! most noble señor!" she cried, clasping his arm with both her hands, "you have returned to take me from this place of horrors! Holy Mother! but I have died a thousand deaths of fear!"

"Come!" he replied, ignoring her heroics, "we have not a moment to lose. We shall have to run for it, as it is."

And as he led the way, he swung the coil of his lasso from hand to hand round and round his body, returning it to its place about his waist.

"What is that?" she asked, shrinking from it with nervous fear.

"Only a riata."

"And with that—"

"I have secured our safety for the present."

"And he?"

"Will give us no trouble to-night, at any rate."

"You stopped him with that, and not with the pistol? I heard no shot."

"To rouse the ranch?—the thing I was trying to prevent? I guess not."

"And the knife? Ah! the saints defend us! That makes no noise!"

"No; but it tells tales afterward. Have no concern; I do not bungle my work in that way."

"Still, both he and his horse— What has become of them?"

"The horse is disabled; the man will not disturb us. Let us hurry on."

And his lasso being now replaced beneath his sash, he caught her hand and drew her rapidly forward.

"But who was the horseman?" she asked.

"Hush!" he warned, abruptly.

And suddenly dropping down, he laid his ear close to the ground.

"It is as I feared!" he cried, leaping again to his feet. "If you value safety, now run as if for your very life! A body of horsemen are close upon us!"

She showed that she could run swiftly when occasion demanded. For the short interval to the place where the rope ladder yet hung against the wall of the house she did not keep him lagging.

By this time the thud of hoofs could be heard by even her unpracticed ears; yet in that moment of peril she paused.

"Once more, your name," she said, clasping his hand with a caressing pressure, and bring-

ing her face close up to his, with a playful little laugh. "Hameeltonn—eh?"

"Up! up!" he cried, with a touch of impatience, catching her off her feet, and setting her as high on the ladder as he could reach. "And do not forget to unhook the ladder and throw it down after you."

She ran up as nimbly as a squirrel, and turning, bent over the parapet.

At this moment the horsemen reached the spot where poor Concho had come to grief.

Yellow Jack being in advance, his horse shied so abruptly as almost to unseat him.

"Hallo! what is this?" he cried, drawing up.

The others followed his example, gathering about the fallen animal with exclamations of wonder.

"It looks as if some one had had an ugly tumble here," said Jack, leaping to the ground. "The horse's leg is broken. He might have finished him before he left, whoever he was."

And drawing his revolver, he shot the suffering beast.

The report reached the ranch as Pipa bent over the parapet and whispered:

"I shall not forget my debt to the most noble Señor Hameeltonn! *Hasta la mañana!*"—the ordinary parting formula in Spanish, literally translated, 'until to-morrow,'—"is it not so?"

With the bewitching little laugh that was all her own, she unhooked and dropped down to him the ladder, threw after it a kiss, and disappeared.

Out on the prairie some one had stumbled on Concho.

"*Caramba!*" he exclaimed, "there is reason why the horse should be left in pain. Here is the poor devil that is perhaps indebted to him for a broken neck?"

"Is he dead?" asked Yellow Jack.

"He has life in him, but none to spare," was the reply.

"Who is it?"

A momentary examination, and then:

"*Por Dios!* who, but Concho?"

"Bring him along."

And they resumed their way.

The brief delay had not been long enough to give Black-Hoss Ben time to creep away. The grass on the level plain was so short, and the starlight in that clear air so brilliant, that any moving object as large as a man could hardly escape discovery. So he crouched close to the wall and lay still.

A moment later Yellow Jack and his party swept up to the door of the ranch; and our hero was almost in their midst. The slightest accident, the snorting of a horse, or the passing curiosity excited by some roving glance fixed upon the dark shadow lying at the base of the wall, might betray him.

CHAPTER XV.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER.

PIPA had hardly glided like a specter down the *escalera*, or stone stairway leading from the housetop, and slipped into her room, when she heard Yellow Jack thundering at the outer gate.

"Pound away, thou cowardly *mestizo!*" she laughed. "I have escaped thy malice, thanks to the most noble señor Hameeltonn, whom I love with a passion that is like the breath of the conflagration when the prairie is swept by flame! Ah, soul of my soul! of thee have I learned the true meaning of love! All that has gone before is as nothing! With thy strong heart beating against my own, what need I fear from Don Roberto or his villainous son! But I must dissemble while yet I am in their hateful power. Ah, Virgin Mother of God! haste the day when my love shall demand of me to follow him!"

This rapture of passion did not interfere with the celerity with which she tore off her outer garments, hiding such as would betray her escape, and slipped into bed.

There she could chuckle gleefully to herself at the sounds of hurrying feet passing her door; for Yellow Jack's thundering summons had roused the whole house, and as it was equally hazardous to keep him or his father waiting, all the menials of the place were astir.

He was admitted and his ill-humor propitiated by a servility that was more in keeping with the Orient than with this free western world.

It was an hour before the hacienda was again quiet and its inmates in their beds.

Meanwhile, having escaped as by the skin of his teeth, Black-Hoss Ben returned to his faithful horse, to find him lying as quietly as a hound.

"Up, my brave steed!" he cried; and the next instant they were interchanging caresses.

Then on his back and away, bearing off the only remaining thing that could be used to compromise Demon Duke's tricky favorite—the ladder which Concho had fashioned with such high hopes, but which had brought him only chagrin and a cracked crown.

When this was securely disposed of, he rode back to the ranch and boldly demanded admittance.

The quiet that reigned was evidence that Pipa had escaped detection.

He went to bed and slept as soundly as if the vengeful *mestizo* were not under the same roof, thirsting for his blood.

In the morning he was up and away while Yellow Jack was yet sleeping off the effects of his last night's carouse.

By an arrangement of Pipa's, Beatrice took her meals *tete-a-tete* with the fair as frivolous Mexican, in her boudoir, their palates being tempted by a dainty spread of the rarest delicacies that the garden, dairies and *abattoir* of the ranch afforded, and the neighboring streams, prairies and chaparrals yielded to skill of fisherman and huntsman, besides such luxuries as may be had by importation where money is not spared—the whole served on the daintiest of translucent china.

But sensuous Pipa loved to dream away the morning hours, in that delicious state on the border-land between sleeping and waking, when one can follow vagrant fancy just enough to be vaguely conscious of a glow of warmth and color, without being able to remember any thing of its kaleidoscopic visions; while the more active Beatrice loved to be up and abroad with nature while her smiles were freshest and her voice most musical.

As yet, she was under the cloud of her recent bereavement, as her unnatural lethargy and sadness showed.

Every morning she rose early, and staying her stomach with a sandwich and cup of coffee, went out on the prairie to gather flowers with which to decorate her father's grave. She went on foot, the rapid motion and exhilaration of horseback riding being out of keeping with her melancholy mood.

Sometimes her rambles would extend two or three miles away from the ranch, clumps of chaparral often intervening so as to hide it from view. Timing herself by the sun, she aimed to return by nine o'clock, spend an hour beside the hallowed spot where all the hope of her life seemed buried, and be ready to breakfast with Pipa, between ten and eleven.

Two or three times Black-Hoss Ben had encountered her; and the respectful sympathy of his subdued yet cheerful tones had lessened her sense of loneliness. No one else about the ranch seemed to belong to the world to which she was accustomed, so much as did he.

She began unconsciously to look for him and to feel vaguely disappointed if he was away before she made her appearance.

This occurred not infrequently, as Ben shrewdly sought to give these meetings the appearance of accident, so as not to arouse her maidenly sense of reserve, and put that barrier between them.

Black Diamond had conceived an affection for her; and as there was no reason why he should be trammelled by the restraints under which his master chafed, his overtures were open and honest. He advanced with the dainty grace peculiar to him, and caressed her hand; and she got to fetching him crumbs of cake, which pleased him mightily.

To Ben this love-making by proxy was a mingled delight and torture.

"By Jove!" he cried, caressing the neck of the animal when they were out of sight and hearing of the object of his thoughts, "I believe I am jealous of you, old fellow! And yet, without you as a mask for my battery, where should I be?"

The sun was well up in the heavens when Yellow Jack rose from his drunkard's couch. He had a brain-splitting headache as almost the only reminder of the night before. Of his encounter with Black-Hoss Ben he could have given no very detailed account. That there had been a row of some sort hung in his befogged brain like a black shadow without definite outlines. It was just enough, taken in conjunction with his other feelings of discomfort, to make him exceptionally savage and sullen.

He took another dram to settle his stomach, and scused his head thoroughly in cold water to reduce the "swelling." He was then ready to make his toilet.

This was a matter that demanded nice care; and he had in his following a man who performed some of the services of a valet. He was first carefully shaved and then dry-shampooed, until his head was as clear as a bell, and he felt altogether better humored. He then donned that rarity of the border, a "biled" shirt, with an elaborately ruffled bosom, upon which blazed an immense diamond, and a conspicuous Byronic collar, which came together so low down in front as to expose his throat and breast to the juncture of the collar bones. At this point a crimson silk handkerchief was tied in a double—commonly called "hard"—knot, and its ends left streaming. He wore neither vest nor suspenders; but a brown velvet jacket, hanging loose and unbuttoned—cream-colored corduroy trousers, supported at the waist by a flaunting crimson sash, and tucked into riding-boots with morocco legs and gold spurs at the heels—and, lastly, a broad-brimmed soft felt hat, matching his trousers in color, cocked on one side, and with heavy bullion tassels depending on the other—completed his rakish toilet.

In feature he resembled his father sufficiently to mark the relationship; but he inherited the straight black hair, fierce black eyes, high

cheek-bones and rigid jaw of his Indian mother's race. His long drooping mustache he owed to his father. But it was from his complexion that he got his *sobriquet*. It was a clear, golden yellow, which, before his health had been deteriorated by intemperance, had been dashed with red at the cheeks.

Altogether, he would have made a fine painter's model for a dashing brigand chief, or a heart-breaking tenor in opera; but as a gentleman for one's daily association—that was a quite different matter.

Yet this was the man with whom Beatrice came face to face on her return that morning, with her apron overflowing with flowers. It was a common house apron, homely enough in itself, yet with a grace imparted to it by the way in which she had thrown the end of it over her arm.

Yellow Jack had mounted his horse for a ten or twenty-mile dash in the pure air of that high latitude to complete the reinvigoration of his system. But, as, in passing round a motte or clump of chaparral, he came suddenly upon her, he drew in his horse, making him curvet gracefully, while he lifted his hat in his most impressive style.

The next instant, and before Beatrice had recovered from her surprise and a vague feeling of uneasiness, he was on the ground, with the bridle-rein over his arm and his hat in his hand; for no one could pride himself on his high breeding more than did this New Mexican gallant.

CHAPTER XVI.

YELLOW JACK AS A CHARMER.

BUT one mark of an essentially coarse nature Yellow Jack could not conceal. Indeed it did not occur to him that a bold look of admiration which brought a blush of confusion to a modest woman's cheeks was unbecoming the character of a gentleman which he tried to assume.

So now he looked Beatrice out of countenance while he said:

"Pardon me, fair lady, if I make bold to interrupt your walk. Although since my return home I have not been informed that our little world had received such an acquisition, it is hardly necessary, seeing you so far from any other habitation, to ask if you are not an inmate of my father's house."

Yellow Jack, like many another, in default of social advantages, had derived his notion of polite address from novels and the stage. It was therefore rather high-flown when he wanted to be very impressive.

But it was not this that most repelled Beatrice. At the sound of his voice she started with a vague sense of unpleasant association. But the present circumstances were so different from those of her first meeting with him, when he appeared in the character of a stage-robber, that it is not strange that her memory went no further back than his father, and fixed upon the resemblance of the two voices as a sufficient explanation of her repugnance to this one.

Yellow Jack, on the other hand, having seen her face, recognized her at once, and muttered within himself:

"Great gods and little fishes! the plucky little dame of the coach! But what can she be doing at the old man's? Gads! if she drops to my voice—good evening!"

Beatrice was too familiar with society to be disconcerted by an encounter with a gentleman under however trying circumstances; but she was so much disturbed by her meeting with this dashing rowdy, that her nervous anxiety to impress him with the fact that she was not wholly unprotected betrayed her into claiming relationship with Demon Dukes.

"I am stopping at the ranch of Mr. Robert Dukes, who is my father's brother," she said, hastening her walk with a feeling that it would add to her security to get in sight of the house.

"Your father's brother?" cried Yellow Jack, with an eager brightening of the face. "Why, bless your sweet soul! that makes us cousins, don't it?"

And as he kept pace with her, leading his horse on the other side, he grinned into her face with a look of exultant proprietorship, which frightened her so that she started aside, and with difficulty restrained the impulse to leap away and run at the top of her speed.

"I—I did not know that Mr. Dukes had a son," she stammered.

"What! did the old man spare you his twaddle about the pride of his heart, the apple of his eye, and all that? You're to be congratulated, I assure you. But it is true that I claim Demon Dukes as my respected progenitor. Allow me to introduce myself as Jack Dukes, at your service. And now what might I call my pretty cousin; and where in the world has she kept herself all these years? Why, my sly old duffer of a dad has kept me in ignorance of your very existence! I promise you, I shall bring him to book for it!"

If Demon Dukes himself was hateful to Beatrice, his son was loathsome. She shuddered at the thought of his being related to her, in however remote a degree.

But he was waiting for a reply; and he was a man such as she would not care to offend.

"My home has been in New York," she said, ignoring his inquiry as to her name.

She felt that there would be contamination in having it pass his lips.

But he would not let her off so easily.

"New York!" he exclaimed. "That is a rushing smart place, I hear; but I'd go my pile that it can't get away with Frisco in some things. For daisy lay-outs where the tiger roams untamed, and for gilt edged shebangs where beauty rules supreme, give me the Golden Gate! A man gets his money's worth there, every time!"

Beatrice was crimson to the tips of her ears. Of his slang she caught the significance of but one word. She had heard the game of faro alluded to as "the tiger." But his reference to "beauty," and the character of the man, left no chance for doubt as to his further meaning.

Without reply she hastened her pace, now trembling with indignation, as her personal fear of him somewhat abated.

It was ill-advised to let her desire to get rid of him be so plainly apparent.

"Why are you in so great a hurry?" he asked. "I claim to be right smart on foot; but you'll wind me, if this keeps on."

"I have been a long while away from the house," she faltered; "and have wandered further than I thought."

"Oh, come, now!" he laughed, "you're as timid as a march hare; but there is no occasion to be afraid of Jack Dukes, and your own cousin at that. Let's take it a little more comfortably, and get better acquainted."

And he laid his hand on her arm, to detain her.

"Oh! I beg of you!" she cried, shrinking away from him with a look that could not be mistaken.

He laughed with an ugly glitter of annoyance back of his assumed good-natured indulgence.

"Waal, I suppose that a city-bred lady would naturally be a little shy of a stranger, having him come upon her in such an out-of-the-way place as this; but when you get a little more used to our free western ways, you won't mind it. And if I keep my distance, I reckon you won't object to my seeing you back to the ranch? You haven't told me your name yet, you know."

With a choking sensation in her throat she replied:

"It is Miss Holyoke."

If she had looked at her companion she would have seen his nostrils quiver and his eyes contract, while his lips drew back from his teeth in a smile that it was not good for any one to provoke.

"Oh! but that isn't cousinly at all," he urged. "I don't look to have you call me Mr. Dukes. I'm Jack here and Jack there;—Yellow Jack, the boys have it; and I don't dislike the handle. But the Christian name of one so fair as yourself must be a sweet mouthful."

There was no help for it.

"I was christened Beatrice," she replied.

"Beatrice!" he exclaimed. "Waal, I swear! that suits you right down to fine dots! It's tony and aristocratic, and all that. Now, Fan and Sal and Joe—they're snide. But Beatrice!—that strikes a man right whar he lives! Now, I shouldn't wonder if the old man cottoned to you from the ground up. Oh! he's been thar! When it's books, or pictures, or anything in that line—it don't make any odds what—you may bet all your preferred stock it's a cold day if the gov'nor gets left! And society?—you can't touch him! It would just make your heart ache to hear him talk about the doings in New York thirty years ago; only I reckon he don't give it away to any one but me. You see, he laid out to lick me into shape; but I always took to hosses and sporting more kindly than to books. You may bet your life it takes a mighty smart man to ring in a cold deal on *yer* uncle!—and if you can give me any points on the Queensbury Code, I'd like to hear 'em!"

Being no judge of sporting qualifications, Beatrice remained silent.

Yellow Jack had warmed up in self-praise, until he had quite forgotten his pique at her want of cordiality.

Her flowers attracting his attention, he went on:

"By the way, a button-hole bouquet, now, from your fair hands, wouldn't go so bad."

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, involuntarily gathering the flowers closer, as if afraid that he should deprive her of a single one of them. Indeed, the mere thought seemed to her like sacrilege.

"I—I—beg your pardon!" she stammered, as her startled glance into his face discovered the effect produced by her manner even more than her words; "but I gathered them for my—my father's—grave!"

The break in her voice, the quiver of her lips, did not appeal—or rather, appealed in vain—to Yellow Jack's susceptibilities. He only saw that she repelled every overture of cousinly intimacy.

"Waal," he said bluntly, "among so many, I should think that there might be enough for both of us."

At that her eyes filled with quick tears, and she began to catch her breath spasmodically.

The fierce struggle of her pride against the sobs that choked her, made this paroxysm of pain so impressive that even the *mestizo's* coarse nature could not be insensible to it.

"Of course," he said, in a sort of sullen apology; for he felt that she was getting an unfair advantage of him, by evading a reasonable request under cover of her woman's weakness—"of course I didn't expect that your old gentleman would depart this life so soon—"

But suddenly recollecting himself, he concluded in some confusion:

"I—I beg your pardon!"

However, Beatrice was too much preoccupied to detect that little slip of the tongue; and an occurrence that happened right on the heels of it was enough of itself to drive the whole matter out of her head.

Both were so engrossed that they had not heard the thud of a horse's hoofs in the soft prairie-loam; but just at this moment, as they cleared the point of a *motte* which Beatrice had gone round rather than pass through in such doubtful company, Black Diamond with his centaur-like rider swept down upon them so unexpectedly, to all appearance, that he almost rode them down.

Before Yellow Jack could utter a warning cry or interpose to save his companion from danger, it was rendered unnecessary.

Black-Hoss Ben sent forth, like a pistol-shot, an explosive:

"Whoa!"

Black Diamond threw forward his fore-legs like bars of steel and settled back on his haunches, stopping as abruptly as a projectile that had struck and imbedded itself in its target.

Sparing both himself and his horse the shock that was inevitable if he remained in his seat, the rider leaped clear over the animal's head, alighting on his feet as fairly and lightly as a circus-rider. It was a most brilliant feat, that took the breath away with fear for the rider's life and then made the heart swell with admiration of his skill.

A moment Beatrice stood wide-eyed, breathless and dumb. Then with a lighting-up of the face, and in her voice a ring of relief that could not be mistaken, she sprang to Ben's side, exclaiming:

"Oh, Mr. Hamilton!"

And while she stood close to him, trembling perceptibly and with the tears yet hanging like dewdrops on her lashes, the eyes of the two men crossed lances!

CHAPTER XVII.

YELLOW JACK HAS A SPOKE PUT IN HIS WHEEL.

WE have said that Black-Hoss Ben's coming upon the pair was unexpected, "to all appearance." The truth was that, in the habit of keeping his eye upon Beatrice in her wanderings, Ben had seen Yellow Jack ride her way; and doubting whether a solitary *tete-a-tete* with the *mestizo* would be agreeable to her—it certainly was not to his taste—he had taken it upon himself to interpose.

We have seen that he arrived in the nicest possible time to establish a deadly feud between himself and Demon Duke's hopeful heir.

A single glance—he had cultivated that instantaneous photography in playing the fascinating game of poker!—showed him Beatrice's distress. He did not look at her again, just as he had no occasion to look at his "hand" after turning it face-downward on the table. After that he gave exclusive attention to his opponent.

There was no emotion of any kind in the unwavering gaze he fixed upon Yellow Jack—only cool, quiet observation.

The *mestizo* had not quite such perfect control over his facial expression. The smile with which he tried to rival Black-Hoss Ben's *nonchalance* was venomous with deadly hate.

"Your agility is so remarkable, sir," he said, "that one would almost suspect that it was the result of professional training. May I ask whom I have the honor of addressing?"

"I am Mr. Robert Dukes's overseer," replied Ben, neither aggressively nor deferentially.

"I," answered Yellow Jack, with a ring of insolent pride in his tones, "am his son."

Black-Hoss Ben did not seem at all disconcerted by this announcement. He merely bowed in acknowledgment of the introduction, and then turned to Beatrice.

The circumstances of the situation forced him into a position that he would not otherwise have presumed to take; but he was a man who never shrunk from acting promptly and boldly when the occasion demanded it.

"I rode in this direction in the hope of being permitted to attend your walk home," he said, with such marked deference that Beatrice instantly read his unuttered apology for presenting himself in the character of one so intimate a footing with her. "I hope that you will not consider my presence an intrusion, and that Mr. Dukes will generously share his good fortune with me."

"Oh, certainly not!" replied Beatrice for herself, crimsoning as she took his cue of familiar friendship. "My meeting with Mr. Dukes

was quite accidental. Indeed, I have not had the pleasure of knowing him until now."

But by this time she had gained self-possession enough to move a little further from Ben's side.

He bowed his thanks to her, and turned with an inquiring smile to Yellow Jack.

The *mestizo*, who had felt the magnetic power of our hero's eye during that brief interchange of soul with soul, put an iron rein on the boiling rage that coursed through his veins like burning lava. But he could not trust himself to maintain this self-possession during a two-miles' walk."

"I regret that I shall have to yield to you altogether," he said, "my ride taking me in another direction. But I look eagerly forward to an early opportunity to cultivate a more intimate acquaintance with my cousin Beatrice. Until then, adieu!"

And bowing to Beatrice, he leaped into the saddle and dashed away.

If she could have seen the cruelty with which he goaded his horse to breakneck speed, and heard the torrent of oaths that poured from his lips in frenzied, pell-mell incoherence, the moment he was out of sight and hearing, she would have feared him even more than she did.

The two whom he had left turned toward the ranch, walking side by side, slowly and in embarrassed silence.

Black Diamond followed, without summons from his master.

Ben spoke first.

"Miss Holyoke," he said, "is it necessary for me to apologize for what I have done, or for the manner in which I did it?"

"No," she replied, simply. "I have reason to be very grateful to you for the tact displayed—which," she added, after a slight suspension of the voice, as if she were balancing the expression of her thought, "is in keeping with your past delicacy."

"I thought that you would understand," answered Ben, ignoring the last part of her speech.

Then silence again fell between them.

Presently he spoke in a lower, somewhat constrained voice.

"May I venture to ask, without indiscretion, whether he was rude to you?"

"Not intentionally. But—"

And here she paused, with a little quiver in her voice, at recollection of the cause of her tears.

"I comprehend," said Ben, very gently.

After that they continued their walk through the crisp prairie grass without the interchange of a word, until they arrived within a few rods of where the girl must turn aside to go to her father's grave. Then Ben stopped and said, in a tone of tender commiseration almost womanly:

"I will bid you good-morning here."

She turned. Their eyes met. The deep, calm reverence in his gaze was like a benediction. It soothed her.

From him, without replying at once, she turned to Black Diamond. The animal was gazing at her wistfully, as if wondering at her long disregard of him.

She extended her hand with an inviting smile.

"We have not yet exchanged our usual morning greeting, Black Diamond."

With a whinny of delight, the horse sprang forward, tossing his head and whisking his tail, and threatening in the exuberance of his feelings, to make his salutation not so gentle as was his wont.

Ben held up a warning finger. The intelligent animal stopped, rolled his eyes, and turned his alert ears his way for a moment's observation, and then advanced more quietly, and put his sensitive muzzle into Beatrice's hand.

A moment she caressed him, and then, turning, extended her hand to his master, saying:

"You have been very kind to me—" and after the faintest perceptible pause—"when I needed kindness very much!"

For the first time perhaps in many years, Black-Hoss Ben blushed in confusion as he took a woman's hand.

Ah! but there was more than confusion there. Such a storm of emotion swept over his soul that he did not venture to answer her in words, but only bowed over her hand, and dropping it, mounted his horse and rode away.

With lingering steps, Beatrice entered a chaparral where a solitary mound marked the last resting-place of the dead. It was strewn with flowers of yesterday's gathering. She removed them tenderly, reverently, and began to redecorate it with those she had brought.

But the conflict of emotion through which she had passed, and especially the last phase of it, had left her spirits so agitated that thoughts foreign to her grief would intrude, until, with a pang of remorse, she cast herself on the grave, crying:

"Oh, papa! papa! am I learning to forget you so soon?"

But her tears and bitter self-reproach were unavailing. She could not escape the recollection of the look that had been in Black-Hoss

Ben's eyes. And with an exaggerated sense of guiltiness, she hurried away from the spot and entered the house.

That night Black Hoss Ben did not close his eyes in sleep, but counted the hours in feverish unrest.

Now he rose from his tumbled couch, to pace the room in wild exaltation of spirits, in which it seemed as if all the world—the world that his soul craved—was within his eager grasp. Anon, as the pallid and blood-stained phantoms came trooping out of his past life to confront him with their accusing eyes, he cast himself prone on the bed, clutching the blankets in his futile agony, and burying his face in the pillows to stifle the groans that seemed to rend their way up from his bursting heart.

He could not endure this. He dressed and went forth, mounted his peerless steed, and coursed over the prairie like one who fled a Nemesis that rode ever at his elbow.

So wild were the throes of passion that swept his soul, it seemed as if the internal conflict must force nature into sympathy—as if the mighty depths of heaven must send forth their winds and floods, to rend with lurid lightning the fathomless night of clouds, and fill the earth with the roar of bellowing thunders! Instead, soft zephyrs fanned his temples, and the calm stars looked down in unmoved serenity.

So the day broke, frescoing the eastern sky with the iridescent tints of mother-of-pearl intershot with arrows of gold; and as he passed through a belt of post-oaks he saw on the open prairie beyond a sight that set his firm nerves to tremble like harp-strings.

Black-Hoss Ben had not been forgetful of his resolve to get a horse for Beatrice worthy of her riding; and the duties of his office leaving him with ample time on his hands, he rode day after day to the prairie where the mustang ranged in wild freedom, bearing no man's mark, there to lie in ambush, with Black Diamond crouching beside him like a faithful hound.

But though herd after herd, displaying mustangs of every shade of coloring and degree of grace, passed under his critical eye, nothing thus far had pleased his captious fancy.

And now he had come upon a troop of two or three hundred, some of them grazing, some lying down, some gamboling in exuberance of spirits—as beautiful a sight as the eye need wish to rest upon.

But one so far transcended all the rest that he had eyes for none other.

Between him and the main herd stood, in a posture of consummate grace, pawing the ground daintily with one fore-foot, a mare the hue of newly-dressed buckskin, with mane and tail lightening almost to cream color. One glance at the flowing lines of her figure, her wide-nostriled muzzle, her active ears, her alert yet gentle eyes, and he was in raptures.

"This is what I have dreamed about!—this is what I have waited for!" he cried; "and now I come upon the desire of my heart with the fresh vigor of my horse wasted in purposeless riding! If I could secure this beautiful creature, she would be irresistible. No horsewoman could have the chance to acquire her and stop at sculples of mere social formality. I will—by heaven! I will possess her, if I have to follow her to the Mississippi!"

But see! she had suddenly turned her head his way, holding it high, with her ears pricked forward and her eyes rolling.

The wind was in his face, so that she could not have scented him. Had her sensitive hearing detected some slight sound, or her watchful eye perceived some motion in the covert that awakened suspicion?

Surely she discovered him; for with a snort of alarm she leaped away, and then stopped to look back for a second glance.

Black-Hoss Ben was almost as excited as a novice stalking his first deer. Fearful of losing this chance of a lifetime, he did not wait to unwind the lariat from his wrist; but giving Black Diamond the well-known signal that called forth his magnificent powers to the utmost, he burst from the covert, uncoiling the lasso as he went by whirling the bight round and round his head.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WILD CHASE.

INSTANTLY all was confusion. With cries of terror the herd stampeded pell-mell. But handicapped as he was with eleven stones' weight, Black Diamond soon bore his master into their midst, scattering them in every direction.

The ruck and run Black-Hoss Ben heeded not as they fell behind. The buckskin mare had penetrated to the center of the herd, and thither he followed her. Soon she found that security did not lie there; and then she began to force her way out of the crowd that only impeded her movements.

Once clear of them, she showed her pursuer that his trained eye had not miscalculated. Her feet seemed winged!

But while, once in possession, this quality was what he wanted, what if it enabled her to escape

pursuit altogether? In this first spurt she was certainly gaining on his favorite.

His chagrin as he was forced to acknowledge this could not be put into words.

"I will never give her up, if I have to kill myself and Black Diamond too!" he cried, desperately.

Once she tried to regain her companions; but he headed her off and gained upon her, scamper as she might, until his heart leaped into his mouth and he was almost ready to venture the cast. But then she discovered the futility of the attempt, and desisting, took a straight course across the prairie toward the rising sun, as if she would rush into its ineffable glory.

Then they settled down to a test of locomotion.

Away! away! over the undulating swells of this wind-swept sea of grass, like yachts in full chase riding the billows!

A belt of timber rose into view, stretching to the right and left as far as the eye could reach, like a coast line. The intervening space was cleared in a breath, and the little mare plunged under the cottonwoods and into a muddy stream.

A mad struggle through the turbid current, a scramble up the crumbling bank, and away again, without stopping to shake the water from her dripping hide!

As Black Diamond leaped gallantly into the flood, his rider, clinging only to his mane, threw himself off his back, so as to relieve him of his burden. So man and horse went up the bank together; and without slacking speed Ben took a step or two on the ground and leaped to his seat again.

These vaults, which he had practiced for amusement, now stood him in good stead. The little mare gained not a rod in that helter-skelter transit.

On! on! with Black Diamond's blood-red nostrils wide and quivering, his eyes rolling and flashing fire, and his head thrust forward until his neck was in a straight line with his withers, and every muscle strained to the utmost, while his master rode with pale face and compressed lips.

On! on! until the sun had risen high in the heavens and pursuer and pursued, gasping with exhaustion and foam-flecked and reeking with sweat, had lost the springy vigor of the start, and were now laboring painfully to the end of the race.

And the gallant little buckskin had widened the breach between them to half a mile!

In vain Black Hoss Ben's calls to his brave steed!—vain the indomitable pluck with which Black Diamond strove to respond, and hung on when defeat was assured beyond a peradventure! Burdened as he was, the little mare was distancing him row at every bound, and bade fair to escape the most persistent chase she need ever fear.

Black Hoss Ben would have given over long ago and spared his horse—as little kindly as he took to defeat in anything—had this been an ordinary case in which the animal was to be for his own use or advantage; but to lose this chance to get a steed that might some day bear the woman of his love away from the wreck of her happiness.

"Never!" he cried between his set teeth. "Let the best horse that ever spurned the earth with flying feet go to his death!—after that I will chase her on foot!"

The desperate thought suggested a way to relieve his exhausted beast.

"One more effort, sweetheart!" he cried; and holding to a lock of mane, he threw himself from his seat and ran beside the horse.

Thus unburdened, Black Diamond plucked up new spirit, and with a faint whinny of grateful recognition of his master's effort to spare him, drew tense once more his flagging muscles.

But this could not last. He had carried his burden too long, while the nimble-footed little beast that had shown him her heels so persistently had borne only her own weight.

He regained perhaps one-third of the lost ground; and then it seemed to Black-Hoss Ben's despairing eyes that the chase was again drawing away from him.

Should he give up in discouragement?

"Never!" he still cried through his set teeth. "I may be giving her life—ay, more!—all that makes life endurable! Never while the strength to move a single muscle remains in me will I give over this chase!"

And at last came what seemed the promise of his reward. Across their path loomed into view an impassable barrier—a "step" in the prairie—one of those abrupt changes of level, stretching for miles and miles across the plain, that mark the mighty throes of old mother earth.

At sight of it Black Hoss Ben uttered a cry of renewed hope.

"It is one chance more, my brave steed!" he cried aloud, as if the horse could understand him. "If I have ever done any thing deserving of your gratitude, do not fail me now."

On struggled the little mare as if she did not see the barrier, or, seeing it, did not understand its fatal obstruction. The fact was that she was too exhausted to notice it until she came directly upon it. Then she stopped a moment, at a

loss and almost in despair. But hearing the merciless thud of pursuing feet, she turned and followed the line of the terrace.

This was Black-Hoss Ben's opportunity.

"Now or never!" he cried. "If she gets away with me here, I might as well take my last look at her!"

And shouting to Black Diamond to stimulate him to infuse the last spark of his flagging energies into this final effort, he leaped once more upon his back and laid his course at an angle to intercept the fugitive.

The effect of the change was at once perceptible. For a short space, at least, the horse could do better with his accustomed burden—including the stimulus of feeling the living man press his knees firmly to his sides, and seeing and hearing the many-coiled lasso whirled whistling through the air, while his rider roused him with cries of encouragement that had the ring of triumph in them—than if to run free.

Now he drew rapidly near the quarry; and this fired his blood until it seemed as if he were fresh again.

But he had need of every incitement. The little mare, whose wind and bottom seemed inexhaustible, called up all her reserve powers; and laying her ears close and hugging the ground until it seemed as if her belly fairly grazed the tops of the daisies, she made her last dash for liberty.

"It really seems a pity to defeat so gallant a struggle!" exclaimed Black-Hoss Ben.

He could afford to be so far magnanimous, now that he saw the end so near.

Round and round his head swept the whistling coils; then out shot the noosed end like the head of a serpent.

Black-Hoss Ben could not repress a shout of wild triumph as he saw it settle over the head of his prize.

Black Diamond, who understood his business, sheered off and planted himself rigidly. Then came the twang of the taut lariat; and the captive was thrown in a heap.

Black-Hoss Ben leaped to the ground and ran toward her. She was struggling to her feet; but a vigorous jerk threw her again on her side. Then in an instant he was upon her, with his knee on her neck.

Vain her shrill cries of alarm and rage!—vain her attempt to bite her captor! A few dexterous turns of the lariat, which his horse slackened at his signal, and he had her bound so that she could not rise.

Then she rested panting and helpless, as beautiful a captive as ever lay in chains.

Black-Hoss Ben next turned to the faithful servant to whose unequalled energies he owed this proud success.

Black Diamond stood with drooping head, occasionally sneezing and showing other signs of exhaustion. His master called him "old pard," and stroked his neck—caresses to which he responded but feebly.

He was led to a neighboring brook, where his mouth was swabbed out with a handful of tender grass, which was made thus to do service as a sponge. Then followed a thorough rubbing down; and he was let to walk about at will.

On going to the little buckskin, Ben found her completely subdued. Only her wild eyes followed his every movement as he stroked and patted her, talking to her caressingly the while, his lightest touch sending a quiver of dread through every muscle of her beautiful body.

Having encompassed her shapely head with a head-stall and bit made of braided horse-hair like his lariat, and fastened a similar leash about one fore pastern, Ben struck her smartly on the rump, to induce her to rise.

For a time she lay only trembling; but presently she lifted her head, then gathered her legs under her, and with a mighty bound was on her feet.

The next instant, her wind regained, she uttered a shrill neigh of scorn, and was for showing him that shackles were never made for a true child of liberty; but at the first mad bound her fore foot was mysteriously tripped from under her, and she was thrown to the ground heavily.

But again she rose and again leaped away, only to fall as before.

Then she lay still, once more cowed by the mysterious power of this strange being whose cunning overmatched her superb strength.

So the struggle went on, until the man made the beast understand that she had nothing to fear from submission and nothing to gain by rebellion. Then when she walked quietly by his side, and allowed him to put his hand upon her without leaping away, he hopped and tethered her, and lay down to sleep off his own exhaustion.

He had the power possessed by some men of sleeping and waking at pleasure; and after an hour given to refreshment he rose, mounted Black Diamond and rode away to the mountains, his prize leading quite tractably.

His destination was a little old but built into the side of a hill and tenanted by a little old man quite as squat and shabby as his habitation. Although he seemed of a rather churlish disposition, there was evidently an amicable understanding between him and Black-Hoss Ben;

for the latter left his prize in his charge with every mark of confidence, and rode away to the ranch.

His heart beat high; his head was in a whirl with a phantasmagoria of intoxicating possibilities; it seemed as if he could not wait for the morning that was to give the woman he loved once more to his longing vision.

It came at last. He awaited her, starting at every sound that might herald her approach.

She did not appear!

The disappointment fell upon his heart like an evil omen; and then began a season of agonized suspense the memory of which was never blotted out of his life.

Neither the next morning nor the one following, nor yet the one after that, brought her out at her accustomed time; yet he knew that her walks were not intermitted. She would let nothing interfere with her duty to her father's memory; but she was careful not to stray so far from the ranch as on the day when she encountered Yellow Jack.

He was torn by a thousand doubts. Had his fancy exaggerated the natural expression of gratitude into something indicative of a warmer sentiment? Had she repented that moment of kindness, and taken this means of showing him the true relation between them.

On the fifth day he deliberately waited for her. She came forth, greeted him with a cold bow, and hurried on with her eyes on the ground, her color changing rapidly.

He had expected something like this; yet it was a terrible shock to him. He rode away with compressed lips and eyes that gazed into vacancy.

But in following the experiences of our hero we have anticipated. Let us return to the day and hour when Beatrice left him with her own pulses throbbing as tumultuously as his.

She entered the house to breakfast in Pipa's apartments.

CHAPTER XIX.

SUSPICION.

ARRAYED in a gorgeous dressing-gown, Pipa reclined on a couch similar in downy upholstery to a Turkish divan, while her maid—a peon girl with black eyes of almost startling intensity when she looked at you inquiringly, and which flashed and sparkled like black diamonds when she chatted with the vivacity of a French *grisette*—accompanied the task of drawing a clocked silk stocking on her shapely limb with the latest gossip.

"Ah, senora!" she was saying, as Beatrice entered, "nothing in all the world was ever half so lovely! It was like heaven! Such dresses! such music! such wine and bon-bons! such gallantry!—for everybody was in spirits as never before. But then"—and her eyes grew wide and dark, and her voice hushed and frightened—"ah, *Virgin santissima!* so terrible a tragedy! I thought I should die with fear!"

With true dramatic instinct she stopped and let this mystery work on the feelings of her audience, while she gazed from one to the other, crossing herself; and then, as she was already on her knees, she clasped her hands and cast up her eyes in a very effective tableau.

Pipa withdrew from her lips the perfumed cigarette she was smoking, and blew a tiny wreath of white smoke into the air.

"A tragedy?" she repeated, listlessly. "That must have been charming. Amuse us with an account of it, little Ema."

The maid thereupon gave a most exaggerated description of the scene at the fandango, making draught on her imagination to invest with marvelous grace and beauty the mysterious stranger who had led all the gallants in her train, while their neglected señoritas, green with jealousy, played wall-flower.

The apparent indifference with which Pipa listened to this rhapsody, which in fact was lotus to her vanity, did credit to her powers of dissimulation.

"Who was this paragon?" she asked.

"It was at first thought," replied the maid, "that it might be one of the ladies who are visiting the Alcalde from over the sea. But wait!—you shall hear! That occurred which made many believe that it could be nothing less than a wicked harpie, who had assumed this beautiful form that she might lead our young master Jack to perdition!—may all the blessed saints defend us!"

And the maid crossed herself vigorously, and ran her rosary through her fingers.

Then followed an account of Yellow Jack's insult to Senor Castilar, the desertion of his partner on the arm of the devil—such was Ema's veritable belief—the *mestizo's* terrible overthrow, the extinguishment of the lights, and the flight through the air on a horse as black as the mouth of the nether pit, without saddle or bridle, and shod with lightning and breathing fire from his nostrils.

"But did you see this terrible monster?" asked Pipa, when the little maid had rounded off her melodrama in this truly heroic style.

"I look to witness so terrible a spectacle—the doings of the Evil One!" cried the maid in dismay. "*Madre de Dios!* have I not ill-luck enough already, what with Concho's

perfidy? You will not believe that he left me to go with that brute, Manuel, whom of all men I despise the most! But it was put up with him or stay at home; and what would you?"

Whereupon the little maid's nether lip began to quiver and her eyes to show signs of humidity, while her pretty brow knit with a look of distress, as if she felt that she had been very shabbily used indeed.

"But did all believe in this marvel?" asked Pipa, who had the best of reasons for wishing to learn whether the less superstitious had started any more rational theories.

"Well," replied Ema, hesitatingly, as if it were a pity to mar so charming a story by bringing it under the hard sunlight of common-sense criticism, "you know that impious lancer, Hernando da Cunha, who will believe nothing of all that many older and wiser than he are willing to swear to on the bones of as many saints as you could place before them?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Pipa quickly; for this was the man whose clear wit she feared most of all—"what said Captain Hernando?"

"It chanced that he overheard that stupid Manuel urging me to come home—forsooth that he might go to his sluggard's couch ere the sun surprised his merry-making! But you may believe that I was afraid to quit the lights and company of the fandango, to traverse the lonely prairie with only so poor a defender as he; and that I was not at a loss for plain words—complimentary or not, as that might happen—to tell him so, with more of my mind on the subject of sottishness and general worthlessness!"

"But Captain da Cunha?" urged Pipa, whose interest in Manuel might be greater another time.

"Overhearing my fears, he chucked me under the chin in his free way, crying:

"Have you seen the winged-horse with nostrils streaming fire? My faith! I marvel not that you should fear the darkness, lest you meet a monster of such undoubted diabolical character."

"You have better reason to fear a visitation of such terrible import," I answered him with spirit, "you who have the temerity to scoff at our holy religion. It is known that you are heretical, and it is even whispered that you are an atheist—the ever blessed Virgin stand between me and thee. But the hour will come when all your hardihood will avail naught."

"*Por Dios!*" he cried, lifting his eyebrows in mock dismay, "where did you learn that it was a part of your religion to believe that a black horse that is ridden without saddle or bridle is therefore bestridden by the unmentionable one?"

"Then turning more grave than I ever saw him before—him who has his jest for every thing—he said:

"Look you! I jeer not at religion, nor at any thing sacred, but at these old wives' tales that it is shameful should be believed by men of good sense in aught else."

"But in a moment he laughed again, as if ashamed to have been so moved; and tweaking my ear, he whispered:

"Listen yet a little, sweetheart! You may better fear Yellow Jack, who has taken the self-same road that you must go, and may find it to his humor to waylay you for your beauty's sake. Would you know the Mephistopheles of these credulous dupes? I think that I can make a shrewd guess that will put your fears to rest."

"I fear to listen longer to your impious doubts, lest I be attainted with your heresy," I answered him.

"And I would have fled from him but that he detained me, laughing:

"Nay! you little bigot! but you shall hear in spite of your would-be deafness."

"Do not give my soul unrest by breathing into my ear some forbidden name!" I cried, struggling against him, while that dolt of a Manuel looked upon my fruitless efforts with the stupid grin of an imbecile. "I fear your spell, wizard!—yet all the heavenly host are witness that I am not a party to your wickedness!"

"At that he only laughed the louder, crying:

"Since when has one of your sex run away from the name of so brave a gallant as Senor Black-Hoss Ben?"

"Would you believe," cried Ema, in that tone in which we have all heard sweet lips defend what they are wont to call "a perfect gentleman," "that any could be found so wicked as to try to put such a shame upon so noble a senor?"

But neither of her auditors heeded this generous protest.

Both had started violently at Black-Hoss Ben's name, but with vastly different emotions.

At mention of a black horse ridden without saddle or bridle, Beatrice's attention had been painfully attracted, and when her fears were confirmed, a pang shot to her heart, and she turned quickly away that her pallor might not betray her.

Pipa only shut her white teeth down on the end of her cigarette and held her breath for an instant. Her shock expended its force within, no trace of it appearing on the surface, except that a keen observer, on the lookout, might

have detected that she seemed to shrink closer into herself, and her eyes contracted, to outward seeming more languidly, but in truth that she might dart a lightning glance of inquiry at Beatrice.

With a masterly effort she controlled her voice to say:

"That might well be. You, yourself, my Ema, have told me of his marvelous horseman ship. For me, I love my bed too well, and he the duties of his office, to give me opportunity to see this wonderful *Americano*. If he were a good Catholic, now, I might hope to see him at mass. But the lady, whom he defended with a gallantry worthy of her observed grace and supposed beauty—had our knowing captain no theory as to who she might be?"

"None! There is the mystery. You see, she was so closely masked that about the only thing certain is that her hair is not red! Did not Hernando himself say that he would give half a month's pay for the slightest clue to her identity? He danced with her and exhausted his gallantries to induce her to give him the most meager peep under her mask, all to no purpose. He swears that her voice was divine;—he caught but a single tone when she unguardedly let it rise above a whisper. But the strangest of all—you will not believe it!—although the richness of her dress proved her a lady of such rank as might scorn a vaquero, she condescended to dance with Concho!—and behold! the airs he has since affected are enough to try the patience of a Sister of San Carmel!"

But at this point Donna Pipa yawned and declared that she was nearly famished. Would Ema cease her chattering, and see that breakfast was served at once?

Whereupon she turned to Beatrice with great vivacity.

"You, sweet friend, are up with the birds. Surely you can tell me of this fellow countryman of yours?"

But Beatrice was strangely silent and uncommunicative. She had first seen him on her way hither in the stage-coach, when he had offered a politeness to her father and herself. And here, seeing her lip quiver and her eyes grow humid, impulsive Pipa sprang up and threw her arms about her, stopping her further speech with a sympathetic kiss.

But the time was at hand when her only prompting would be to strike her poniard home to her heart!

CHAPTER XX.

A SPOILED BEAUTY.

It was not until well along into the following day that Demon Dukes returned from a personal investigation of the assault on the coach.

The peon lad who was the first member of his household introduced to the reader, lounging about as was his wont, discovered his approach and ran toward the stables, crying guardedly and with an intensity of excitement that was significant:

"Jago! Jago! haste for your life! The master is coming down upon us like the wind!"

"*Caramba!*" came in the deep voice of the chief of the equerry from the depths of the stables. "Hear ye, sluggards? Don Roberto is at hand! Away to your tasks every one!"

Instantly there was a scurrying to and fro, accompanied by a Babel of cautious ejaculations of various sorts.

"Silence!" commanded Jago, in a voice ridiculously out of keeping with the assumption of authority.

But the clatter of hoofs was already at the very gate of the stable-yard.

Demon Dukes always aimed to surprise his subordinates—if off duty, so much the worse for them! Now as he swooped down on them, his piercing eye took in the whole place at once, and noted signs of disorder. With a gathering frown he rode straight to the stable-yard, instead of dismounting at the door of the ranch.

He was met at the door by Jago with a deprecating smile of welcome. As he looked down the line of stalls, he saw a most orderly array of grooms and stable-boys, with curry-comb and brush, and pitchfork, and besom, and barrow, who had apparently desisted from their work only to glance up at him.

He looked at them suspiciously, and then asked their chief:

"What is the meaning of this confusion?"

"Excelenza will understand when he learns that Don Juan is at home," replied Jago, in a manner so deprecating as almost to be fawning.

"The dog has found his way back, has he?" said Dukes, in a tone that disappointed Jago; for Jack was usually in favor with his father.

"Well, that saves your bacon, my man!"

As he turned again to the house, he saw Jack standing in the doorway, with his feet wide apart, one hand under the short skirts of his jacket, and the other holding a cigar between the first and second fingers on a line with his mouth, while with his head thrown back, he amused himself by puffing successive rings of smoke into the air. The attitude was lounging, and so careless as to be, under the circumstances, disrespectful.

His father had time to traverse half the distance that separated them ere he had sent the

last perfect ring on its oscillating voyage. Then he returned the cigar to his lips, clasped his right hand in his left under the skirts of his jacket, and, rocking on toes and heels, blew a stream of smoke at an elevated angle past one closed eye, while he gazed calmly from the other into the face of the man whose frowns he feared to provoke. Finally, when his father had come quite close to him, he rolled the cigar into the corner of his mouth and said, carelessly:

"Waal, old man, what's the best word?"

"I'll see you presently," replied the senior Dukes, passing him—to permit which he had the grace to yield half the doorway.

"Take yer time," he returned, without looking after his parent. "Don't incommode yourself on my account."

"It isn't likely that I shall," answered the elder, with a fine thread of feeling in his voice.

It was not often that Demon Dukes indulged in sarcasm to his son.

"What's the matter with the old duffer?" was the filial reflection of the "prop of his house."

"M'm! I seem to perceive a faint rodential odor! The new overseer, eh? *Exactly!* I owe him one more!"

And the way in which he smiled, with set teeth, was not pleasant to see.

Out in the stables they were speculating:

"*Caramba!* what has young Jack done now? Don Roberto was never so short with him."

The master of the house proceeded at once to the apartments of his favorite.

On his way hither he came suddenly upon the woman who had been the bride of his youth, bright, joyous, loving—giving her hand with her heart in it into his keeping—whom his stewardship had turned into a creature of stony silence, an enigma to those who knew her.

Beatrice, who through the vines that screened her window, could observe what was going on out in the courtyard without being herself seen, was a curious spectator of this meeting. She saw him in his hurried walk brush heedlessly against the woman, with such violence that she was thrown against the wall, involuntarily turn and look at her, and then keep straight on without sign of recognition or apology.

Could human nature, even so crushed and dehumanized, endure this without resentment?

For the first time in her knowledge of her this woman showed some sign of feeling. She turned and looked after her recreant husband, and when the door of Pipa's room had closed behind him, stood gazing at the wooden barrier. But this was all. There was not a trace of emotion in her impassive face.

The boudoir, which looked as if a whirlwind had been holding high carnival there, was tenanted only by the lady's-maid, who, pale, tearful, and trembling with fright, was putting things to rights in such a flurry herself that the prospect of her bringing order out of chaos was a very remote one indeed.

The floor was littered with flowers, evidently torn and trampled upon. Ema had the pieces of a broken vase in her hands, and water was dripping from the table where it had been overturned. A gay silken hammock, swung from wall to wall, hung flaccid, its pillow thrown out, its crimson shawl strung across the floor as if kicked in petulant fury. A lute lay in a corner, with a divan cushion resting partly upon it, as if it had been thrown at it, the others lying here and there about the room where they chanced to fall. An ottoman lay bottom-upward, and a chair was on its side. A gentleman's dressing-gown lay under the table in a wad; the heel of a slipper could be seen sticking from behind a picture-frame; and a fez—the red, brimless cap of the Turk, used by Demon Dukes as a smoking-cap—hung from a swinging lamp, its tassel caught in the glass pendants.

The master of the house stopped in the doorway to survey the scene of confusion.

"Oh! Excelenza will be indulgent!" cried Ema, deprecatingly. "Every thing was so beautiful but a moment ago!—these flowers that you would think had the dew yet on them, and all so tastefully arranged! Never was Paradise more tranquil, more happy—with the mistress singing like a bird, laughing like a rippling brook, calling to me a thousand sweet nothings."

"You are sure, little Ema, that no touch, no little arrangement—ah, *santa Madre de Cristo!* behold!"

"And all because of a little rent her loving hands, her vigilant eyes, had discovered in the dressing-gown of Excelenza!"

"You should see her, singing, laughing, dancing, posing—low listening, with her hand raised in admonition, her head on side like that of a bird—now stamping her foot with a frown of pretty petulance, ready to cry with despair, and all the while trembling with expectancy!"

How far the faithful maid would have prolonged this rhapsody it is impossible to say, had not Dukes passed her to enter the next apartment.

Within him, amusement and flattered vanity—for he thought that he could read the situation pretty accurately—got the better of annoyance. But he never relieved any one's suspense if he could help it; so while his face was in view of

the little maid, it was as impassible as a stone wall; but the moment that his back was toward her, it relaxed into a somewhat grim smile.

Interceding with the saints in behalf of her mistress, the peon girl addressed herself again to the task of bringing harmony out of discord with a zeal that promised to have everything in "apple-pie order," by the time the room was needed for occupancy.

In the sleeping apartment, Demon Dukes found Pipa in sad disarray as to the dainty drapery she had donned for his reception. She had torn off her gay robe and some of her jewels, flinging them right and left, and cast herself on the bed, burying her face in the pillows.

"Heyday, pretty one!" he cried, "and what's the matter now?"

No answer from the injured beauty, save a quivering of her form with sobs.

Dukes sat down on the edge of the bed, and slipping his hands under her, sought to lift her upon his breast.

Struggling against him, she cried:

"Don't touch me! Let me die ere my heart is broken with cruelty! Ah! Mother of God! how have I offended thee?"

And with renewed paroxysm of sobbing, she buried her face again almost to suffocation in the pillows.

"Come, come, my pet!" said Dukes, gently breaking her tenacious hold. "Have I sinned past forgiveness?"

Suddenly letting go the pillows, she turned her tear-stained face toward him, crying reproachfully:

"Two days gone! and your dogs and horses are more to you than I! Is then my beauty fading, that you no longer seek me first?"

But he stopped her mouth with a kiss.

Then followed the usual explanations and assurances, until the ruffled beauty smiled pathetically between the spasmodic catchings of her breath, and toyed with his beard, and brushed the stray lock off his forehead, and so was comforted and restored to her wonted graciousness.

During the time thus occupied the boudoir had undergone transformation at Ema's deft hands.

Here, having assisted her rehabilitated lord in his toilet, placing his slippers, holding his gown, and setting his fez to her liking with pretty penitential shame-facedness, and having lighted his hookah with coquettish grace, Pipa reclined in her hammock, and kept him company with a cigarette. Then she sung to him to the tinkle of her lute, and danced to the click of castanets, with voluptuous flexures of the body, writhing of the arms, and glances from half-closed eyes.

She received his praise with the open, honest delight of a child, and chatted with him so charmingly, that one could hardly believe that the little termagant who an hour ago tossed the room in confusion was one and the same.

When finally he left her, she heard him address his hopeful son:

"Now, sir, if you have nothing of greater importance on hand, I shall be glad of a brief interview."

"I am quite unoccupied," replied Yellow Jack, who was amusing himself by making a spaniel leap back and forth over a stick, while he balanced himself on the rail of the veranda, swinging his feet in and out of the balusters.

He got down, stretched himself, and followed his father into the room adjoining Pipa's apartments.

That good subject for missionary enterprise immediately hastened into her oratorio—but not for devotional purposes, we are sorry to have to say! Instead, having carefully locked the door, she took down from where it hung on a peg against the wall a dilapidated garment which, being opened up, would have been found to be a monk's cowl, and was, in fact, a relic of a padre of exceeding great piety. This she irreverently tossed on the floor; and forthwith eye and ear alternated at a diminutive cranny in the wall.

The persons in colloquy on the other side were Demon Dukes and his son.

CHAPTER XXI.

A PRECIOUS PAIR.

YELLOW JACK found the master of Dukes's Den standing ceremoniously beside his own chair, waiting for his son to be seated. Ignoring this courtesy, doubtless sarcastic, he threw himself into the chair opposite, crossing his leg over his knee and resting his arm on the table, so that his back was partly turned toward his father.

"There seems to be every prospect of a dry season," he observed, casting a discontented side-glance at the table, which lacked the usual furnishing of bottle and glasses.

"It will be in keeping with the unconvivial character of our interview," answered his father.

Jack shrugged.

"That is all right, if you propose to do all the talking."

"On the contrary, it is my wish to hear from you."

"I am surprised that you should put yourself to so much trouble. I did not know that I was an amusing talker."

"I am not seeking amusement."

"That's lucky; for, I assure you, you would get mighty poor music out of a dry whistle. Have a cigar—do!"

And drawing a couple from his pocket, he extended them with a yawn to his father.

"Let us come to the point!" said Demon Dukes, with a touch of impatience.

"By all means!" assented his son with alacrity. "The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll get to something more exhilarating. Sorry you won't have the weed—it is so consoling when one is bored."

Drawing a long breath and expelling it in a soft, prolonged whistled of ennui, he scratched a match on the sole of his boot, watched it burn to a clear flame, and ignited his cigar, while his father watched his cool insolence with mingled annoyance and admiration.

"Now, fire away, gov'nor; and cut it as short as you can consistent with your own satisfaction."

Taking him at his word, Demon Dukes plunged into the heart of the matter at once.

"How long is it, sir, since you turned road-agent?"

Yellow Jack laughed.

"Oh, come, now! you're not so straight-laced as to taboo a little harmless amusement."

"Is it a harmless amusement that puts your neck into a halter?"

Jack shrugged.

"Well, that depends. But, what would you?"

From association Jack sometimes lapsed into Spanish idioms.

"Is it any better to dislocate one's neck yawning in this dull hole? And then, I am surprised that you should be so solicitous for the security of my neck."

"Then you do not deny having stopped the coach ten days ago?"

"*Por Dios!* why should I? You and I have no need of insincerity in such trifles. I am following in your footsteps, sir!"

"In the fiend's name, you are! And did I teach you to rob your own father?"

"H'well!" answered Jack, with that blending of a laugh with speech which has contempt underlying it—while he critically examined the lighted end of his cigar, "really I should hardly care to venture an opinion as to what you might have done, had I enjoyed the advantage of your example during your father's time. But do I understand you to intimate that I have robbed you?"

"I should think that a fair inference!" sneered Dukes; "or at least that you had made a very bold attempt to do so. Lucky for me that a better man blocked your little game!"

Yellow Jack smoked very complacently, considering the sting it was to him to be thus reminded of his defeat by Black-Hoss Ben.

"Would it incommode you to explain yourself?" he asked, coolly.

"Come, come, Jack! I thought that you and I had no need of insincerity toward each other—in these trifles, you know?" said his father, who was restored to good humor by getting a point on his son in this word-fence.

But Jack showed no gap in his armor at so slight a prick as that.

"Which does not seem to preclude your being unusually enigmatical," he rejoined—"no doubt vastly witty the while. But if you expect, on my part, any great brilliancy at guessing your riddles, you should sharpen my perceptions with a little good wine."

"You shall be indulged," replied his father, fetching a bottle and glasses from the sideboard, and placing them before his promising heir. "Perhaps that will so far quicken your faculties that you will discern a remote allusion to my overseer."

"Well, now, my dear sir, this is generous!" cried Jack, squaring round to the table, rubbing his hands and smiling beamingly. "I pour a bumper to my hospitable host! Here's to the end of your nose, sir! May it never lose its sunset glow!"

And he drained the glass with evident zest. "Your overseer? Ah, yes! I observe that you have made a change."

"Thanks to you!"

Jack laughed lightly, with a lifting of the eyebrows.

"And you call that robbing you?"

"On the contrary, I am indebted to you for a better man."

"Then what have you to complain of?"

"Let us say the time selected for settling your dispute with him."

"My dear sir, if you knew how long I had kept my hands off that dog of a Greaser, you would grant that any time was in season."

"Not while my money was on his person, if you please!"

"A-ah!" ejaculated Jack, elevating his brows and nodding his head repeatedly, as if light just began to dawn upon him. "We seem to be getting at the robbery. Do you mean to accuse me of taking your money from him?"

"Far from it!—thanks to the plucky fellow—

honest, too, which is more of a marvel, egad!—who confined your offense to an attempt."

And Demon Dukes chuckled with huge satisfaction.

"You wrong me, sir," said Jack, looking his father straight in the eye without wavering. "My concern was with Treviador; and I never touched him with anything but my horse's hoofs. When I had paid him my compliments, I left him where he lay, for the coyotes and buzzards. If he had money of yours, and any of my fellows tried to relieve him of it, I assure you that it was without countenance from me. I wonder at any one touching him, in the condition in which I left him."

Demon Dukes looked at his son wistfully, as if he wished to believe his statement of the case. But he went on guardedly:

"Ned Coburn got possession of his money-belt, and would have made off with it too, but for a well-directed shot from Black-Hoss Ben, for which I shall see that he does not go unrewarded."

"Ned Coburn!" repeated Yellow Jack, with a quick look of intelligence very cleverly simulated. "Then he was doing a stroke of business on his own account under cover of a compliment to me. He came to me with the story that you had discharged him—"

"Which was true enough. I found that it lay between turning the place over to him and kicking him out of it altogether."

"Well," cried Jack, with seeming indignation, "he came whining to me like a whipped cur, to enlist my influence to get him restored to his place. He then told me of the chance to get even with Treviador; and the stopping of the coach was altogether of his planning. You can see that it was a cleverly-conceived plot to use me for his own purposes; and I confess that I was completely hoodwinked by the dog."

"But the robbing of the others, Jack?" said his father, almost piteously.

"Well, old man," said his son, with seeming frankness, "can't you see that it was necessary to cover my little affair with Treviador? It would hardly do to lift him out of a coach in broad daylight, and—well, treat him to the dose I gave him! Of course I could not know that the other occupants of the coach would turn out to be my respected uncle and his fascinating daughter, since I was in ignorance of even the existence of such relatives."

"Jack, I want to believe you!" said Dukes, reaching across the table, and putting his hand on his son's.

That was the first mark of anything like tenderness that the *mestizo* could remember as coming from that quarter. It showed that some trace of the parental instinct had survived the obliteration of almost every other human sentiment in the callous breast of the man before him.

"You may rest easy in this matter," he said.

His father looked at him steadily for a moment, and then pursued:

"Let that pass. There is another matter that I wish to touch upon. Jack, we are pretty well off here—that is, for this kind of life; but we have a chance to make a fortune that will put us on the top round of the ladder in any country in the world."

"What?" cried Jack, with interest, feeling not a little relieved at having got out of an ugly scrape very cleverly. "A fortune?"

"A million and a quarter!"

"No! Ye gods! that's enough to make a man's mouth water! But how is it to be got?"

And on the other side of the wall was another listener, quite as eager as he, who murmured:

"*Madre Maria!* we shall be princes!"

"You have seen your cousin?" said the father.

"You may bet your life I have!—and taken quite a fancy to her, too."

"I am glad of that."

"Eh? the wind lies in that quarter, does it?"

"If you marry your cousin you will be master of a fortune that ought to have come to us anyhow. I was uncle Bob's favorite, until an unlucky turn of the cards set me on one side of the fence and his money-bags on the other."

"Then," cried Jack, "we'll only be coming into our own; and, by the gods! we'll make the rifle, by fair means or foul!"

"There's no need of foul means, Jack. You're a likely enough fellow. Your dare-devil style takes with women. I was a blade at your age, and I know. All you have to do is to impress your cousin as being a half-wild prince of the plains, with the savage virtues—frankness, generosity, courage, and all that—and without the civilized vices."

"A-ah—could you enumerate them?" laughed Jack.

"It is unnecessary," replied his father. "There is but one that is likely to give irremediable offense."

"And what may that be, pray? You know I haven't had the advantage of studying the social animal in his native element, the States."

"You couldn't be long among them without seeing glaring examples of it," said Dukes. "It is a keen eye to the main chance in marriage."

Jack laughed.

"There seems to be something singularly

familiar in that!" he said; "but of course any such sordid calculation is far from us!"

"It is enough if it seems to be so," replied Dukes. "And you have the advantage yielded by the size of this establishment. They talk about 'cattle kings' in the East, with vague notions of vast wealth; and a girl ignorant of such things can not but be impressed with the great number of our stock; so you will seem to be above interested motives."

"Well, I wish that every difficulty was as easily disposed of. I spoke of my feelings. It is only fair to add that my pretty relative don't seem to reciprocate my cousinly interest with any sort of cordiality. Would you believe that she actually snubbed me for that confounded new overseer of yours?"

"Pugh! you need fear nothing from him."

"A 'likely fellow,' to use your own expression!"

"A mere adventurer!—a man without a second shirt to his back! Preposterous!"

"Oho! This eye to business in matrimony extends to the ladies as well, in your Eastern society, does it?"

"But you wouldn't have a woman with a million and a quarter marry a beggar, would you?" demanded his father.

"M'm! not unless he was a *deuced* likely fellow!" laughed Jack. "But then," he added, "I have reason to believe that this particular gentleman has his eye fixed in another quarter."

At that the listener on the other side of the wall was ready to shriek with laughter.

"Mother of God! if they knew!"

Demon Dukes looked fixedly at his son.

"Jack," he said, "whether he has or not, we mean to succeed in this enterprise!"

"You may bet your sweet life we do!" was the prompt response; and the face of the speaker underwent a startling transformation, all the flexibility of sportiveness turning suddenly to the rigidity of stony determination. Utter ruthlessness glittered in the eyes that he fixed upon his father's face. Devilish cruelty looked back at him. The two understood each other.

On the other side of the wall the pretty eaves-dropper was reflecting sagely:

"One cannot suffer from a dearth of rivals! It is at least prudent to have a woman like Donna Ba-ab-treece attached. By my soul, senores, I will second your efforts!—at least so far as to see that she turns not her eyes upon my Prince Hameelton!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"WITHIN ONE OF IT."

MEANWHILE, for reasons of his own, Yellow Jack chose to ignore his quarrel with Black-Hoss Ben. When they met they were civil to each other; but it was apparent that it was an armed truce between them. Those who knew the *mestizo* best watched him expectantly.

"Yellow Jack has not forgotten his overthrow at Senor Castilar's," said Jago to an attentive circle of listening stable-boys. "Just now it pleases him to try to trace the mysterious senorita, who seems to have quite infatuated him; but when he is ready—you hear me?—he will remind this insolent *Americano* of their quarrel."

"Whoever she is," observed a vaquero, who was of such social consideration that he might claim respectful attention from even the chief of the equerry, "she has no reason to complain of the devotion of the *Americano*. He lets not a day find him away from her side. And comrades, a word in confidence!—Yellow Jack has commissioned me to follow this gay gallant, and discover who his wonderful lady-love may be."

"It is a tribute to your well-known skill at trailing my Eustaquio," said a companion; "but, *por Dios!* I envy not your task! If the *Americano* discover you dogging his steps—"

He finished his sentence significantly by snapping his finger and thumb.

Eustaquio lifted his eyebrows with a careless shrug.

"What would you my friend?" he said.

"Is not all life a lottery?"

The stable-boys gazed at him admiringly—a tribute to which our bold Eustaquio seemed quite indifferent.

"But if he discover her?" pursued the other, "does he hope to supplant the overseer? My faith! there are not many who would have that assurance!"

Jago looked mysterious as he put in his word:—

"There are other ways, my children, of retaliating upon the *Americano* through his sweetheart!"

"Do you think that that is Yellow Jack's purpose?"

"It would not be an affair of conscience with him, if he spared the lady."

But at this moment the *mestizo* himself made his appearance.

He drew Eustaquio aside and held a brief colloquy with him. Then he went over to the box-stall where Black Diamond awaited his master.

Black-Hoss Ben, entering almost immedi-

ately, found him with the horse's fore-foot lifted.

"It is a magnificent animal that you have," said Jack, pleasantly.

"He suits me very well," replied Ben, in a tone that did not encourage conversation.

Nevertheless Jack pursued:

"I see that you have him shod for mountain-travel. It is well to have a sure-footed beast under one wherever one may ride."

"Exactly."

Black-Hoss Ben turned and made a trivial remark to one of the stable-boys.

Yellow Jack glared at him and gnawed his mustache in silence.

Ben read all this in the awed hush that rested on the observant stable-boys and vaqueros.

Jack walked out of the stable, to anticipate Ben's riding coolly away without noticing him further.

When Ben was out of sight, Eustaquio took his departure, going however in another direction. But a circuitous route brought him to Ben's trail; and leaving his horse, he proceeded to follow it with great skill and caution.

But he had a bad man to follow. Ben's suspicions had been roused; and before our bold vaquero had gone far, he found himself collared by no gentle hand.

The resort to his ready poniard was anticipated; and he was disarmed with a dexterity that considerably astonished him.

Oaths in the choicest Castilian were quite ineffectual. Black-Hoss Ben had him!

"Well, my man, how is it I find you so deeply interested in my movements?" he asked.

"Senor, I swear to you that it is chance that—"

"Oh, yes! I quite understand that you are indifferent to perjury. But without that unnecessary verbiage, explain to me how it is that, picking your course so carefully, mere chance should yet guide you directly in my footsteps along five miles of a purposely rambling trail!"

The vaquero saw that prevarication was useless. He began to beg for mercy.

"You admit, then, that you were following me?" asked Ben.

"Si, senor. But, *por Dios!* a little harmless curiosity!"

"About what?" asked Ben, coldly.

"Is not senor an object of interest to all?" was the cunning plea. "*Caramba!* shall his mode of life escape idle speculation?"

"Is not my mode of life open to you all? Don't I live among you?"

"Ah! of a verity! But—but—"

"Well, but—"

Driven into a corner with those unwavering eyes holding him transfixed, the vaquero was forced to say:

"There are hours in each day when senor absents himself."

"And you were following me to discover where I went?"

"*Diablo!* it requires not a seer to guess that."

"And why I went?"

The Mexican smiled knowingly.

"Is not senor's gallantry the theme on every tongue?"

Black-Hoss Ben started. His thoughts gave a bound from the spot where they stood to a certain room in Duke's Den around which his imagination cast a halo of sacred mystery.

"What is said of my daily absence?" he asked, his face showing nothing of his perturbation of spirit.

"Is the mysterious belle of the fandango one to be quickly forgotten? Is it not natural that all should wonder who she is and where she lives?"

"And that is the gossip of the place—that I am paying daily visits to an unknown lady?"

Eustaquio did not understand the expression that came into Black-Hoss Ben's eyes; but it certainly was not anger. On the contrary, it looked very like proud exultation.

He felicitated himself on having put the dreaded *Americano* in good humor.

"Her beauty, her grace," he began; but Ben interrupted him with sudden peremptoriness:

"Who sent you to discover who this lady was?"

Eustaquio's start at this abrupt question and the fawning manner he immediately assumed were enough to prove that his next words were lying.

"Have I not had the honor to tell senor that it was idle curiosity? To know what is a mystery to all others—*por Dios!* that has its charms!"

"I will give you justy sixty seconds to find a better answer than that," said Ben, quietly, taking out his watch to note the time.

The vaquero looked at him. There was that in the cold precision of the *Americano* which struck a chill to his heart. It was borne in upon him that protestations were worse than useless.

For perhaps thirty breathless seconds he hesitated; and then he replied without equivocation:

"Don Juan."

Black-Hoss Ben knew what a conquest it was

to win such an answer in such manner from this man. It was no trifle to betray a man like Yellow Jack.

"I thought so," he replied, quietly. "Well, I shall require you to return with my compliments to your master. Take off your jacket."

Eustaquio stared.

"Did I hear senor aright?"

"Didn't I speak plainly? Strip yourself to the waist."

"But, senor, for the love of God!"

Black-Hoss Ben went coolly about the selection of a hickory rod not so remarkable for size as for suppleness.

"Holy Mother of God! what would you?" cried the now thoroughly frightened Mexican.

"I intend to put my mark on the man who dared to dog my footsteps at the behest of any master—just as I should have branded that master if he had dared to come himself."

Black-Hoss Ben spoke quietly, cutting away at the rod he had selected.

"But the infamy! *Diablo!* to be whipped like a dog!"

"You should have thought of that before," said Ben, running the rod through his hands and trying its flexibility, as one does a riding-whip or rapier. "Meanwhile, you are keeping me waiting."

He spoke so quietly that it seemed as if so implacable a menace could not be conveyed in so calm a tone.

The Mexican stared at him in bewilderment.

"Come! come! must I time you in everything?"

"But, my God—"

"Oblige me!"

And that formula of politeness, spoken as suavely as to a lady, was accompanied by a look that enforced obedience.

As pale as death, the Mexican began to undress, without a word further of protest. But his black eyes blazed with a hate that showed that Black-Hoss Ben was making one more implacable foe, if the time ever came when he stood in the power of his enemies in Duke's Den.

When the vaquero stood with his back bare, he said, in a voice quite different from what might have been expected from a man of his temperament, so desperately calm was it:

"Does senor insist on the infliction of this disgrace?"

"Certainly," replied Ben, with a quiet look of surprise that would have befitted the questioning of his purpose in a case of most ordinary occurrence.

"So be it!" replied Eustaquio, in a tone that might have daunted some men.

He turned round, and braced himself for the shock that was to wound the spirit more than the body.

Black-Hoss Ben drew the rod through his hand as one draws a saber through its sheath; and it described a graceful curve through the air.

But why did it remain suspended?—why did the vaquero wait for the blow that did not descend?

His teeth were set, his hands clinched, his frame quivering. He was suffering all the shame of that disgraceful infliction; then why was the mere physical pain—that which was least—delayed?

Before Black-Hoss Ben's mind rose the vision of a woman's face with pained, disapproving eyes.

"You may put on your clothes," he said, quietly.

Eustaquio turned and saw him toss the whip aside. Perhaps it is needless to say that he did not inquire too curiously into his good fortune, but got into his garments as quickly as possible.

Black-Hoss Ben, taking not even the ordinary precaution to draw the charges of his revolvers, courteously handed back to the astonished vaquero the weapons of which he had recently deprived him, mounted his horse, and without looking round, rode away.

Eustaquio, half-dressed, stood staring, and saw him go his way unmolested.

He followed him no further!

Returning to Yellow Jack, he gave him a circumstantial account of what had occurred, only omitting for prudential reasons, the fact that he had betrayed his—Jack's—complicity in the matter. He gave Jack the impression that Bill had taken so much for granted.

That Jack swore roundly goes without saying.

Gopher Charley came to his relief.

"Look a-hyar, boss," he said, "that comes of sending a boy to mill."

"Perhaps you can do better," said Jack, somewhat touchily.

"Waal!" exclaimed Gopher Charley with fine disdain, "if I couldn't hold over any Greaser that ever stood in shoe-leather, I'd sell out dog-gone cheap!"

"Will you undertake to find out where this fellow goes?"

"Ef you've got money as says it's worth my while."

A bargain was struck at once; and then Yellow Jack went on a "big drunk." This of itself was nothing unusual and would have resulted

in nothing worthy of a place in this chronicle, but for the fact that, in this state, he addressed himself to the courtship of his cousin.

Thus far his efforts to ingratiate himself into her favor had proved miserably unsuccessful. Now he took a drunken man's unreasoning determination to have it out with her.

"Faint heart never won fair lady!" he quoted to himself. "It takes boldness. Boldness!—that's the card! They like you to take 'em by storm, so to speak—make a great fuss about it, and all that, as if it was a matter of life and death. And then they play shy, and they won't have it. Oh! I know 'em like a book! But you've got to humor 'em;—oh Lord, yes! you've got to humor 'em. God bless 'em! they're a great institution!"

And in this mood he went forth to encounter the girl once more, but this time on the open prairie in view of the house, though perhaps a mile away.

"Good-morrow to thee, fair cousin!" was his stagy salute; and Beatrice stood at bay, with a woman's fear of a man in liquor.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MURDEROUS PLOT.

"Oh, come, now!" he went on, seeing her evident wish to avoid him, "you're not to be so shy of me, you know. Ain't I your cousin; and ain't it the most natural thing in the world for cousins to be fond of each other? I don't mind saying that I have taken quite a fancy to you. And the old man has, too. Only the other day he says to me:—'Look here, Jack,' says he, 'ain't it about time that you had cut your wild ways? It's all right for a young man to sow his wild oats; but the time comes when he ought to marry and settle down to something steady. Now there's your cousin;—what's the matter with her? That's what the old man said; and I told him that that was my game all the while. Come, now! what have you got to say to that?'"

It must not be inferred that this was Jack's usual way of love-making. The fact was that he cared nothing for Beatrice whatever. She was not his style of a woman. He had to go through the form of a proposal to her, it making very little difference with his plans whether she accepted or not. So in his drunken state he did not even carry out his own theory of courtship.

"I hope that you will not interfere with me," said Beatrice in a low, constrained voice as she hurried on.

"Oh, gammon!" he cried, roughly, "this thing has gone about far enough! Do you think that I will eat you, that you rush off with that look the moment I come near? See here, my fine lady! I'll teach you to stand still when I want to talk to you!"

And he caught her by the wrist.

Like an outraged queen she whirled upon him, no longer timid and shrinking, but royally indignant.

"Take your hand off of me!" she said, making no effort to release herself.

Not to the strongest in body, but to the mightiest in soul, is the victory.

Yellow Jack dropped her wrist as if he had received an electric shock.

It was the power of the low voice and fearless eye.

Without looking back, she hurried on.

The rebuffed ruffian ground his teeth and swore, but let her go. But from that time his purpose changed to a more deadly one.

"See hyar, old man," he said, addressing his father in private colloquy, "this marrying business is no go. We might have known that from the first. And hang me if, come to think about it, I want to be bored by such a wife! She'd make a mighty ugly stand if she got her dander up, and don't ye lurgit it!"

"What have you been up to?" asked Demon Dukes. "The girl has come home all in a flurry. Some of your drunken nonsense, I'll be sworn!"

"Well," said Jack, carelessly, "I sounded her on her matrimonial prospects, and she gave me the grand bounce in rousing style, I can tell you."

"You never could let liquor alone for two days together, nor keep from making an ass of yourself the moment you got loaded up," growled Dukes.

"Oh, the dence!" cried Jack; "if I've got to play the saint to get her dirty money, let the confounded thing go!"

"We ain't letting it go so easy!" said his father with decision. "See here, Jack, you must smooth this thing over. We don't want her to be making a row before we have time to turn ourselves."

"Oh, I'll apologize fast enough!" laughed Jack. "It's odd what virtue there is in an apology. Make it all right with a man's—and most of all with a woman's—vanity, and you've got 'em! What fools we mortals be, fur a fact!"

That encounter with Yellow Jack aroused Beatrice. Thus far she had gone through the mechanical round of each day in a sort of lethargy. She had shrunk from interrogating the future which was so full of doubt and difficulty. But now she was forced to ask herself if she

purposed to remain among these surroundings until she reached her majority.

If she had asked herself why she had remained so long with any semblance of contentment, she would have thought that the grave out yonder in the chaparral was sufficient answer. If it had been suggested that Black-Hoss Ben had had any influence in the matter, she would have repelled the imputation with indignation and pain.

And yet, after Ema's gossip about the fandango, her situation had seemed wretchedly mournful. Now she suddenly woke to the fact that it was no longer sufferable.

Without friends or money, she resolved to appeal to one of her uncle's executors. She wrote to him at length, describing her situation in all its repulsive details.

The next thing was to get the letter mailed without the danger of interception. The nature of its contents made her apprehensive on this score, though thus far she had had no reason to suppose that she was in any way under surveillance.

It was no difficult matter to bribe the peon lad, who has figured twice before in this chronicle, to take it to the nearest coach station.

But his mortal dread of Dukes made him an unfortunate messenger; and when he unexpectedly came face to face with that tyrant, his manifestations of guilt were too marked to escape notice.

"Hallo hyar, you little imp!" shouted the ranchero, "what are you sneaking off there for? Come! out with it!"

"Oh, Excelexa!" cried the poor little wretch, "you will believe me that it is nothing!"

"You confounded little liar! I'll believe nothing of the kind. Are you waiting for me to flay you alive?"

And the merciless whip stung his bare legs, leaving a red welt.

"Mercy, Excelexa! Do not kill me!"

And falling on his knees, the child handed the letter to his cruel master.

"Who gave you this?"

"Donna Beatriz, Excelexa."

"Well, do you run to the station and back; and when she asks you whether you delivered it all right, mind that you don't fail to tell her that you gave it into the hand of the agent himself. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Excelexa!"

"And then I'll see what is to be done with you for daring to hide anything from me like this. If you manage it cleverly, maybe I'll let you off altogether; but if you bungle the matter so that she suspects that there is something wrong, I'll take the hide off of you from head to heel!"

"She shall not suspect, Excelexa!" sobbed the child, and ran away, as much distressed by his enforced treachery to one whom he had learned to love as at the physical pain he was suffering.

When not under the dominion of his deadly fear of Dukes, he was an adept at dissimulation; so he had no difficulty in imposing upon Beatrice.

Meanwhile father and son were in consultation over the letter.

"Well," laughed Jack, "it must be confessed that she has given us a very faithful setting forth."

"Let's to business," said Dukes, not in a humor for jesting. "What do you propose to do about it?"

"It's clear that the jade will never marry me of her own free will and accord."

"And there is no way of forcing her to?"

"Excuse me! I'm not so anxious to get her, if there was!"

"But you don't propose to let the money slip through our fingers?"

"Well, hardly!"

And Yellow Jack's eyes contracted with cruel suggestiveness, as he turned them for a side-glance at his father.

"What are you thinking about, Jack?"

"What do you know about the conditions of this will?"

"Nothing, except that the money was left in trust for the girl. Her precious father was duffer enough to die before I had time to get the particulars out of him."

"Suppose that from some cause or other she failed to reach her majority? Accidents will happen, you know."

Demon Dukes looked at his son inquiringly.

Jack looked straight back into his eyes, with his face perfectly blank.

"I know nothing about the conditions," repeated Dukes the elder.

"If there are no conditions further?"

"Well?"

"Who are the heirs at law?"

"There are none."

"Except ourselves?"

"Ourselves, of course."

"Well, then, I reckon that's the best we can do."

"But, Jack—"

The father leaned across the table with the instinct of a plotter.

Jack shrugged.

"Least said soonest mended," he quoted.

And rising, he walked out of the room.

Demon Dukes, who was not squeamish, as we know, looked after his son with a feeling that did not amount to horror; and yet this was a serious business to him.

"My own brother's daughter!" he muttered to himself, with decidedly disagreeable sensations.

He went out of doors to get the air, as if the room had got suddenly close.

"Perdition!" he growled, "am I losing my nerve? It is ours, anyway. The jade has no right to cut us off with her finikin notions. Why ain't Jack good enough for her?"

And so, by working himself into a rage, and making out a case of injury—as many of us have done when seeking to justify something that we know is not right—he quieted the slight compunctions that rose from some little traces of humanity that were left in his breast.

As for Jack, he was troubled by no scruples that would stand for a moment against a million and a quarter, or, indeed, a much smaller sum.

He took the first occasion that offered to apologize to Beatrice.

It was the old plea:

"I wasn't myself, cousin Beatrice; and of course you won't lay up against a man what he does when he's in liquor, if he's ready enough to admit that he was a brute, when he comes out of it."

Privately Beatrice thought it little extenuation when a man pleads irresponsibility after having deliberately abdicated control over the brutal instincts of his nature; but she answered him civilly, as all of us have done to like offenders. It would be enough if he left her without molestation until she heard from the executor to whom she had written.

Several days passed quietly enough. Jack sought to win her confidence by treating her as if he was doing penance for his rudeness. So she gradually returned to her old habits, wandering at will during her morning rambles.

The monotony of the scenery in the immediate vicinity of the ranch enticed her further and further, as she felt more secure. She had met Jack once or twice, when he spoke to her and passed on, so that she no longer feared annoyance from him.

One morning she had strayed full three miles away, when the soft breezes bore to her a gradually increasing uproar of bellowing cattle. At first she thought nothing of it, as the sound had long since become perfectly familiar. She supposed that the vaqueros were driving the herds somewhere in her vicinity—that was all.

But what was her dismay to see them suddenly burst into view, a sea of tossing bodies pouring down the glade in which she stood, so as to completely fill it, and even more, as she could see them sweeping on in countless numbers beyond the neighboring mottes.

To attempt flight was hopeless, even if she had the strength. Long before, at her fleetest pace, she could traverse a quarter of the distance to the nearest chaparral, they would sweep on and over her, leaving her a shapeless mass of mangled flesh, so inground with dirt that her humanity would hardly be recognizable.

She stood motionless, staring dumbly at them as they swept down upon her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BLACK HOSS BEN TO THE RESCUE.

MEANWHILE poor Concho had recovered from his fall, to find himself considerably battered and bruised, but fortunately with no bones broken. At the expiration of a week he was as good as new in body; but the spirit had received wounds not so easily healed.

His knowledge of the lasso enabled him to interpret the movements of a dark shadow of which he had caught a mere glimpse an instant before he went over the head of his horse; and he was shrewd enough to guess the rest.

If now the lady in whose cause he suffered had deplored the event, he would have been happy in the sacrifice of his body for her protection; but that she should ignore her debt and treat him coldly as one who had failed her in the moment of trial—worse still, that she should in his presence confer marks of especial favor on his rival and the man who had rolled him in the dirt, was bitterness indeed.

Pipa was intriguing enough to know that she could with perfect safety carry on an "affair" with Black Hoss Ben under cover of Concho's chaperonage, his earlier complicity closing his mouth. So, attended by the vaquero, as was usual, she had no scruple in throwing herself in Ben's way, and paying very open court to him.

It would be hard to imagine a more trying situation for a spirited lover than that in which Concho found himself. He bated Ben venomously; and all his love for Pipa turned to gall and wormwood. While they despised him, he was busy meditating some dark revenge that would involve them both—and leave him quite free from danger of being drawn into their fate! It was this last and all-important consideration that made the principal difficulty of his plot.

Meanwhile Ben had a reason for indulging for a while Pipa's preference for him. He knew that when the true state of his feelings was discovered she would be fiercely jealous of Beatrice; but he did not think that she could materially injure the girl; and to her own suffering he was quite indifferent.

He encouraged her to talk about the current gossip at the ranch with reference to the affair at the fandango, in order to draw from her confirmation of what Eustaquio had told him, and to substantiate the interpretation he had put on Beatrice's motives; and she lent herself blindly to his purpose.

"Ah, Senor Hameelton!" she cried with animation, "never was so rare a farce! It is believed of all that you have an affair of gallantry the most desperate. 'What would you?' they say. 'A lady who can win such devotion must be of marvelous beauty. And her reserve—you will not forget that—which would not expose her favor to idle gossip! Ha! ha! is it not amusing? And Senorita Beatriz?—ah, *Dio mio!*'"

She spung this upon him very cleverly, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

But Ben's face was so impassive as to effectually deceive her.

"What of her?" he asked, quietly, as with only passing interest.

"It is plain that she thinks you a sad Lothario."

"What does she say?"

"Oh! as to words, nothing. But it is her cold northern look of disapproval. You would think her a scandalized nun of San Carmel."

And the pretty Mexican laughed merrily, so that her small white teeth showed to bewitching advantage.

"Then you have not made a confidante of her?" said Ben, wishing to keep her talking about Beatrice.

"*Santa Maria!* do you think I would so burden her conscience?" laughed Pipa, more gayly than ever. "But, senor," with a sudden assumption of demure gravity, "these daily absences? My heart! I myself am jealous of them!"

And she looked at him in a way that invited his confidence.

"Is it not well to keep up this misapprehension?" he asked, evasively. "And for the same reason, are not these meetings imprudent? If suspicion be once roused, the other links follow so obviously that they could hardly escape the dullest apprehension."

Pipa looked at him reproachfully.

"It is plain that senor finds no pleasure in seeing me," she said, in a low voice, accompanied by a look that would have brought a declaration, if he had had any regard for her.

"But senora's safety is to be considered first of all," he replied.

And ignoring her sigh and the "killing" glance from under her long, curved eyelashes, he took leave of her.

He had learned all that he wanted to know.

Unfortunately, we can not always use people—especially such people as the fair Mexican—for our pleasure, and then drop them at will. He was to hear further from this lady before he was through with her!

But he heeded nothing of this as he rode away into the mountains. His heart beat high, and a smile came often to his lips.

"To-morrow," he said to himself, "I will put it to the test!"

The morrow came. He rode away before daylight. When he returned he was followed by the little buckskin as docilely as by a pet spaniel, though she was as free and untrammelled as when she gave him so hot a chase not a fortnight before.

As he neared the spot where he expected to come upon Beatrice, Black Hoss Ben slowed his pace. The task before him seemed more difficult than when he was in a glow of new hope. How could he approach her? What could he say to her?

Fate opened the way for him. His intelligent ear was caught by sounds that needed no interpreter.

He stopped and listened. Then he leaped from his horse, and laid his ear to the ground. Then, turning somewhat from his course, he rode rapidly forward.

Suddenly he came upon a scene that sent the blood tingling through his veins.

He saw a vast herd of cattle rushing hither and thither in wild excitement, which was being augmented by the very men whose business it was to prevent any such disturbance. Instead of pacifying the maddened brutes, their keepers were riding back and forth yelling and driving them back upon one another, so as to confuse and terrify them.

"What in heaven's name are they doing?" cried Ben. "Are they gone mad? They will bring on a stampede if they don't look sharp!"

He urged his horse forward to interfere and prevent the catastrophe; but he was too late. The chaotic currents and counter-currents united to form a mighty tide that flowed in one direction, and gaining impetus every moment soon swept on like a liberated sea!

Its tossing billows were the backs of the animals that rose and fell as they galloped madly

on; its sun-obscuring clouds were the black pall of dusk that enveloped the moving mass; its bellowing thunder and booming surf were the multitudinous voice of the throng and the tramp of its myriad feet!

At sight of this spectacle, grand or terrible according to one's security or danger, a new panic struck to Black-Hoss Ben's heart.

"My God!" he cried, "Beatrice is somewhere here, and on foot! She will not know how to escape them, even if it is possible!"

But where was she? She might be anywhere within a radius of a mile. The view was so obstructed by prairie islands—mottes or clumps of chaparral—that she might be quite near to him and yet hidden from sight.

His only hope was to head off the stampede, and ride in advance of it, on the chance of discovering her in time to catch her up on his horse.

But she might be even between him and the van of that terrible tide; so he rode straight toward it; and rounding a *motte* he saw his worst fears realized.

"Beatrice! Beatrice!" he shouted, forgetful of social forms in that moment of dread.

It was his heart, not his head, that called to her.

She did not hear his voice, drowned by the roar of those thundering hoofs; but gazing about helplessly for some means of escape, where there was none on earth save two wild horses, but that one of them bore a rider, while the other, though tossing its head, rolling its eyes, and snorting with terror, yet seemed constrained to follow.

"Run! for heaven's sake, run!" cried Ben, beckoning to her with waving arm.

For a moment she gazed at him as if stupefied; and then seeming to grasp his meaning, she sped toward him with the fleetness of a gazelle.

But what was her feeble strength to cope with the danger that was rushing down upon her like a whirlwind? The very excess of her fear made her wasteful of her energies. She strained every muscle to the utmost at the outset, and sped along with lips apart, panting and sobbing with terror.

The result was inevitable. She was soon exhausted; her speed perceptibly decreased; she staggered, and presently tripped and fell headlong on her face.

Black-Hoss Ben, who saw all this, and knew its fatal consequences, would have given his life to get a word of instruction to her. He felt the cold sweat start from every pore as she went to the ground.

She lay still, as if stunned.

He calculated the distances that separated her from death and rescue respectively. Could he reach her before the fatal tide overwhelmed her?

It seemed as if they would meet just at that point.

If that was so, her death was inevitable; and to dismount to lift her from the ground would be to sacrifice his own life gratuitously.

But love does not gauge by the scale of utility.

"Let me die, if need be, with her loved form clasped to my heart!" was the cry that seemed to rend its way from the depths of his soul.

Yet that even this should be granted depended upon the nerve and obedience of his horse. How many horses could be goaded, even with bit and spur, into the very teeth of a herd of stampeding cattle? Would Black Diamond prove so amenable to his master's mere will?

On they swept, the horse showing that he appreciated the peril of that terrible plunge, his master riding with set teeth and knit brow.

Nearer and nearer drew life and death, like panting runners with the goal just at hand. Black-Hoss Ben measured the lessening distances with jealous eye. He had more ground to pass over; but Black Diamond's speed was incomparably greater than that of the cattle.

He could see their glaring eyeballs, their streaming muzzles, their cruel horns, the hoofs that would beat that beauteous form into a shapeless mass!

In an agony of horror he yelled at the top of his voice, and waved his arms wildly; but he might as well have shouted at the in-coming tide. Then he drew his revolvers, and began to fire before he got within range.

He would have time for but one or two effective shots; so if there was the slightest chance to cause a split in the herd, or to slacken their pace the least bit, these shots would not be wasted.

Once more he called frantically:

"Beatrice! Beatrice! Oh, my God!"

His voice was swallowed up in the thunder of those hoofs that made the solid earth tremble.

But the girl gathers herself up and staggers toward him in a dazed, half-conscious way. Her clothes are torn; her face is bleeding. But it is a change; it is a hope; she is on her feet!

And now they are upon her; but he, too, is there! He fires two last shots, and throws his pistols away. But they have done noble work. The time is to come when he will hunt that plain over to find them again, and treasure them as sacred relics.

Two huge bulls plunge head-foremost, plow-

ing up the ground with their horns, so close that a shower of dirt is thrown over Beatrice. But the rescuer is at her side, just as the divided host sweeps by, inclosing both of them. He has bent, and catching her under the arms, swung her to his horse's withers. He holds her in a close embrace, though she knows nothing of it; for she has succumbed at last to the accumulated horrors of her situation.

And now Black Diamond is in the flood, borne on like a life-boat in the billows.

There is danger of his being gored by the sharp horns that surround him on every side. At any moment his smooth flanks may be gashed. But he yields himself with perfect tractability to his master's will, and his superior speed gradually bears him out of the surging throng.

The little buckskin has been in advance all along, galloping just out of the reach of harm and looking back for the trainer she has come to love faithfully. Now on this side, now on that her head is turned; and she whinnies piteously to him, and snorts in rage at the brutes that keep her from his side.

When at last he has cleared himself of the herd, she joins him with every mark of rejoicing; and so together they sweep on to safety.

We pass over the sensations of our hero as he held the mistress of his heart in his arms snatched from a cruel death.

He bore her to a water-course, and there gently bathed her bleeding face. It was but a scratch; yet every drop of her blood was precious to him.

Presently she recovered consciousness; and when recollection came back, she clung to him, shivering and shuddering and sobbing hysterically with dread—her nerves so unstrung that nature shook off all trammels of convention, and her heart spoke the truth without disguise.

Reverently Black-Hoss Ben soothed her, yet trembling with apprehension lest his passion should hurry him into some act that she might afterward remember as an undue advantage taken of her helplessness.

The presentation of the little buckskin came about quite naturally. Beatrice's admiration was instantaneous; and as she suspected no reason for disguising it, it was expressed frankly.

"I am glad that you are pleased with her," said Ben; "for I look to her to restore to me what she, in conjunction with circumstances, has robbed me of."

Beatrice looked at him inquiringly, and he said simply:

"Your confidence."

The girl flushed painfully, and dropped her eyes without reply. She knew to what he referred. She could conceive of no explanation in such a case; and yet her heart leaped with a delicious hope.

"Miss Holyoke," said Ben, "justice to myself demands that I should tell you what it would otherwise be in bad taste, to say the least of it, to reveal. Fortunately, I can vindicate myself without injury to another."

With that introduction he told her the whole truth, in simple, straightforward, manly fashion, only putting Pipa's escapade in the light of an innocent frolic—which required the suppression of Concho's sentiments toward her and her preference for Ben himself.

"You see how easy it was to misconstrue my daily absence into evidence of an intrigue," he concluded; "whereas I was engaged in training this little beauty to the end for which I had captured her—to make her worthy of your acceptance."

At that she looked up at him with a quick, startled glance.

"It is but the execution of a purpose formed the moment I saw you ride," he said.

"Oh, indeed!" she cried, "I could not receive so valuable a present from—from—"

She stopped in confusion.

"I had hoped that we were not such strangers!" he said, in a low, wistful tone, completing her thought. "As for the intrinsic value of the animal, if I had had that in view, I might have caught a score while I was waiting for her. And do you fancy that I would turn her into money along with the blighted hopes that would be inseparably associated with her? No! if you disappoint those anticipations, I will restore her to the freedom from which I took her! Cannot you see that the ordinary social laws do not apply to this case, and that to give you a horse here on the plains is no more than to ask you to accept a fan that I had painted for you, if I happened to be an artist, and we were in New York?"

She looked up at him with a smile in which playfulness blended with shyness.

"You reason so ingeniously that it seems a pity to withhold one's assent to the correctness of your logic," she said.

It was tacitly understood between them that that was her acceptance; and when they parted at the door of the ranch, she simply put her hand in his and said:

"Thank you very much!"

She was gone like a phantom; and as Ben turned away, his face flushed, his heart bounding with delicious hope, he happened to cast his eyes upward; and there on the housetop,

bending over the parapet, was Pipa, white and trembling with jealousy, a witness to their parting!

CHAPTER XXV.

A WOMAN'S BLOW.

INSTEAD of going into Pipa's boudoir to breakfast, Beatrice hastened to her own room. She felt that she could not meet any one just then, while her soul was in such a whirl of emotions.

The moment she was alone the reaction set in, and she found herself completely prostrated by the trying scene through which she had passed.

Meanwhile Pipa had come down from the housetop, and rushed into the seclusion of her own bed-chamber like a wild creature.

Ema was frightened at her appearance.

"What has happened?" she cried, as her mistress passed through the breakfast-room.

"Do not keep breakfast waiting, but say that I am ill and do not wish to be disturbed."

The little maid went on into Beatrice's room, to announce that breakfast waited her, and found her in bed, looking very pale.

"I shall not trouble you for breakfast this morning, Ema," she said. "All I want is perfect quiet."

The little maid retired, murmuring:

"Ah! *Maria santissima!* they have quarreled, these two!"

It was a very natural inference under the circumstances; but her mistake was quickly corrected; for out in the patio she was met by an excited and dust-covered vaquero, who cried:

"Don Roberto!—in God's name, where is he?"

"Miguel, what has happened?" asked the girl, breathlessly.

"Do not detain me, Jezebel!" cried the fellow, roughly, stamping past her.

"What's all this row about?" demanded the harsh voice of the master of the ranch, as he made his appearance through one of the doors.

Ema hastened to escape observation, only stopping within earshot and peering distance.

The vaquero cast himself at his master's feet in well-simulated fear.

"Holy Mary defend me from thy wrath!" he cried. "Do not put a curse upon me, because I bring you such terrible news! You will believe that I am as blameless as my comrades for what has happened."

"What has happened?"

Demon Dukes was—or appeared to be—instantly in a rage.

"Have you killed one of my cattle? Speak up!"

"Worse than that, Excelenza!—far worse, I fear!"

"Well, what is it?—curse you! what is it?"

"A stampede—"

Demon Dukes immediately began to swear and stamp about, reciting his probable losses.

This was so characteristic of the man that any one would have been deceived by it.

Standing in his room, where he could see without being seen, and watching with eagle eye, Black-Hoss Ben was so deceived into believing that, whatever might be the facts as to the occurrence of the morning, over some features of which he had been puzzling ever since, the man before him was not a party to any villainy that it might involve.

Just then Yellow Jack made his appearance loungingly, as was his wont.

Ben now transferred his attention to him.

The *mestizo* sat down on the rail of the veranda unconcernedly, looking from the vaquero to his father while he smoked.

Miguel approached him with the rest of his story. He told of the stampede, interlarding the account with a medley of explanations and excuses, all attested by oaths in such variety as he could command, and then went on:

"Ah! but the worst is to follow! Queen of heaven, intercede for us, if so terrible a thing has indeed befallen this house! The unmanly ageable brutes rushed off in the direction where the niece of Excelenza is wont to gather her flowers!"

"What!" cried Yellow Jack, now springing up with animation enough, while his father stopped swearing, and stared in well-simulated dismay.

Black-Hoss Ben saw Yellow Jack seize the wretched messenger by the shoulder, and did not suspect that this little drama had all been arranged beforehand for the benefit of any one, who, not in the secret, might chance to be in position to witness it.

"But did none of you try to warn her?" cried Jack.

"It was in vain," answered the vaquero.

"Never was so wild a rush."

"And you have not looked for her? She may have escaped to some chaparral—"

"My comrades and I rode in every direction, shouting in despair. It is our only hope that some merciful Providence may have detained her in the house this morning."

"Perdition, no! She went out as usual. Of course she *must* have gone. She always goes."

The vaquero knew that as well as did Jack.

But here Ema made her appearance.

"Ah! God be praised, senores!" she cried,

"Donna Beatrice is in her room, safe and well!"

"In her room?" shouted Jack, turning as if stung.

And something in his countenance gave Ben a disagreeable sensation.

Demon Dukes, too, seemed more astonished than relieved by this intelligence.

The excited maid, who was crying with delight, saw nothing of this, but went on to multiply assurances. Only when Demon Dukes would have stalked into Beatrice's room to convince himself, she interposed with:

"Oh, Excelencia! it is impossible! Pardon my presumption; but the lady is in bed!"

"In bed?" repeated Jack. "Has she been hurt? And how did she get here?"

On this point the little maid could give them no information; so she only repeated that Beatrice was indeed there with every appearance of only slight indisposition.

Ben walked forth, and said quietly:

"Gentlemen, it has been my good fortune to save Miss Holyoke's life. It will relieve your anxiety to be assured that she is quite uninjured, and when she has had time to recover from the nervous shock, will be as well as ever."

Guilty consciences left both Dukes and his son in doubt as to whether there was any covert sarcasm in Black-Hoss Ben's speech; but the fact was that, ignorant of Beatrice's prospective wealth, Ben lacked the cue that would have put him on the right track. He could see no reason why an attempt should be made against the girl.

The scowl with which Yellow Jack received his intelligence, was susceptible of two interpretations. He might be disappointed with the result; and he might only grudge Ben his share in it.

Dukes, his son and his overseer, now rode away to look after the cattle.

Ema ran to her mistress, feeling that the gossip of which she was the delighted bearer, warranted her in disregarding her instructions that she was not to be disturbed.

Pipa listened with a whitening of the face and a blazing of the eyes that frightened her attendant, until she suddenly broke off her stream of words with:

"Oh, my lady—"

"Don't be a fool! Go on!" cried Pipa.

And the little maid continued, though with less relish, to the end of the chapter of delightful horrors.

But when she would have expatiated on the romance of the rescue, Pipa stopped her with a fierceness that shut her mouth and "opened her eyes"—the last metaphorically.

"Behold!" cried the little maid, who was wise in her day and generation, "my lady is jealous of the beautiful *Americana*!"

At the same time she knew her own sex too well to be surprised at Pipa's next move.

Her manner abruptly changed to one of extreme solicitude.

"Ah, poor, dear! she must be nearly dead with fright and exhaustion. I must go to her at once. Get a cup of strong coffee, my Ema. It will of course be impossible for her to eat; but we must give her something to strengthen her. Hasten!"

And where a man would have stared the little maid ran away reflecting:

"She would hoodwink me, would she? Ah, my lady! you cannot so easily readjust the mask that slipped aside in your rage!"

Had she but guessed the terrible purpose that lay back of the Mexican's sudden assumption of smiles!

No sooner was she out of the room than Pipa, with her face set to the ferocity of one of those Borgias whose blood she had once before wished might course in her veins, sprung to a little cabinet, curiously wrought and inlaid, and took therefrom a tiny vial which she secreted in the palm of her hand.

A few minutes later she presented herself at Beatrice's bedside, with the coffee in the daintiest of china.

"Oh, my dear!" she exclaimed, "I have just learned of your miraculous escape! How terrified you must have been, and what glorious exhilaration when you were beyond the reach of danger!—but what misery now, when you feel how it has worn upon you! See, I have brought you a cup of most delicious coffee. It will relieve that horrible sinking feeling."

"You are very kind, Pipa; but indeed I have only need of rest."

"Ah, little heretic! are you to be your own physician, then? Come! we will not listen to that!"

"Set it down, and I will try to drink it presently," said Beatrice, who had remained with her face turned to the wall.

The fact was that she had been crying softly to herself, and did not wish to let Pipa see her tear-wet face. Just now she felt that she could not bear the effusive sympathy of the Mexican.

"Do not think that I am insensible to your kindness," she went on, "if I ask only for quietness."

With a few more words Pipa went out, leav-

ing the coffee as directed on the stand at the head of her bed.

Fifteen minutes later she stole back on tip-toe.

Beatrice was sleeping heavily.

The Mexican glided forward and seized upon the cup she had left, with the ferocity of a tigress.

Not more than a table-spoonful of the coffee remained in the cup.

"She has drained it to the lees!" she whispered with savage glee. "Now continue your sly rivalry! How innocently ignorant you was when I questioned you! Oh! I could smite you in your white face!"

No flush of resentment relieved the bloodless pallor of that upturned face! The sleeper heard not, heeded not!

"And now to remove these evidences that would tell against me, but that Don Roberto will make no over-close scrutiny, I fancy. So they tried to remove her in their clumsy way! But a herd of cattle is an unwieldy weapon. My tiny messenger of death is swifter, surer, stiller; besides that it leaves no repulsive disfigurement. These *Americanos* are barbarians!"

She glided from the room, taking the cup with her, washed it so that no trace of the deadly poison remained, put a like quantity of fresh coffee into it, and returned it to the stand.

And the sleeper woke not! Would she ever wake again?

Out on the prairie Demon Dukes and his son exchanged glances, and the latter said, with a wicked smile:

"Your overseer, it seems, has taken the first trick!"

Had Pipa taken the second for them?

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCHO TOUCHES OFF HIS MINE.

CONCHO was drunk—there could be no doubt of it. Moreover he was drunk to the point where a man becomes mysteriously boastful or tearfully confidential, according to his audience. Things had come to such a pass in his unhappy amour that he was moved to seek consolation in the "flowing bowl," and as dark thoughts of revenge had harbored in his brain for a fortnight past, making the staple of his daily meditations and his nightly dreams, it is not surprising that they should still riot there, threatening some fatal indiscretion.

Eustaquio's failure and Gopher Charley's attempt, the issue of which was yet pending, were the theme of animated discussion, when Concho broke in:

"Hark ye, comrades!—listen yet a little. It is not the belle of the fandango that Senor Carlos will find at the end of the trail he is following."

"What then, my Concho!" asked one, humoring him.

"Whatever else," persisted Concho, with a drunken man's doggeance, "it is not the belle of the fandango."

"Nonsense! You are drunk, man!—sodden drunk!"

"Drunk or sober, there is that in the secret chambers of this brain," tapping his forehead, "which if revealed, would make this hacienda reek with blood and her chambers echo with cries for mercy where there was no mercy!"

"Bravo!" laughed a listener. "Our Concho is a famous tragedian. *Por Dios!* I feel the blood tingling to my finger-tips!"

"Prithee make not thy fearful revelation!" adjured another.

"My revenge is not yet ripe," said Concho, gravely.

"By our Lady!" cried yet another, "I should not wonder if Concho had knowledge that he has hidden from us. Do you forget, comrades, that he danced with the mysterious beauty not less than three times? *Caramba!* he was her favorite without a doubt!"

A cunning look came into Concho's eyes. He bobbed his head with a knowing smile.

"Wait yet a little! The time may not be far distant when I shall break the seal of silence! Then ye wise ones!"

And he shrugged his shoulders mysteriously. As if by contagion the whole party was seized with the thought that this drunken braggart might indeed know more of the matter than they had given him credit for. The fact that the mysterious lady had shown him marked favor had already been the theme of not a little curious speculation. Now they thronged about him with eager questions.

He put them off with only the answer:

"Not yet for a little! But when I open my lips, then let the accursed *Americano* beware!"

There was an unobserved witness of this scene. Gopher Charley had come into the stables, just returned from having informed Yellow Jack that a beautiful little bronco, and not a lady, was the attraction that took Black-Hoss Ben away from the ranch every day.

There was something in the marked venom of Concho's manner that fixed his attention and convinced him that there might be something worth knowing back of it.

He resolved to discover the cause of the vaquero's intense hatred of Black-Hoss Ben.

To this end he went to Eustaquio.

"You're a friend of Concho's, ain't you?" he asked.

"Yes, senor."

"You drink together and gamble together?"

"Yes, senor,"—showing his teeth with a smile.

"Do you suppose that with the help of *aguardiente* you could worm a secret out of him?"

Por Dios! *aguardiente* makes close friends!" laughed the man.

"Well, then, I want you to find out what particular reason Concho has to hate this Black-Hoss Ben. You yourself have no cause to love him."

The vaquero ground his teeth and swore in his throat. He was yet sore over his humiliation.

"Now," said Gopher Charley, "you can make common cause with him, and propose to work up some downfall for the overseer."

Eustaquio entered into the scheme eagerly.

A little later he and Concho were cheek by jowl over a bottle of *aguardiente*.

They had a very fraternal time together swearing at the overseer, and then Eustaquio said:—

"*Caramba!* this is but words! Why should we not retaliate on the accursed knave?"

"I am with you, comrade."

"But how? We must develop some plot. We must manage somehow to bring Don Roberto or Don Juan upon him."

"Hush, my Eustaquio!" whispered Concho, taking the bait at once. "Have not I cause that would put both upon him like bloodhounds?"

"You have?"

"You are a good friend of mine, Eustaquio?"

"How often have I sworn it?"

"You have reason to hate the overseer as much as I?"

"With my whole soul, *por Dios!*"

"Your hand! We will work together for his downfall!"

"To the death!"

They sealed their alliance with another swig of *aguardiente*.

In hiding where he could hear all that was said, since he would trust no "Greaser," Gopher Charley now bent to catch every word.

"The mysterious belle of the fandango!" said Concho.

"Ay! if we could but strike through her!"

"Slowly! You don't know her yet!"

"But you do, I'll be sworn."

Concho wagged his head slyly.

"Would you hear?"

"By my soul! I attend you with all eagerness."

"*Donna Pipa!*"

"*Dios santissimos!*"

Gopher Charley, in his place of concealment, started.

"Waal, I'll be eternally hornswaggled! What blokes we have been! A wooden man would have guessed her the first clatter!"

"*Donna Pipa!*" repeated Concho.

And now began the little fiction by which he was to protect himself while making a scapegoat of Black-Hoss Ben.

"The overseer came to me to make him a rope ladder. Behold! this is the payment."

And Concho took from his pocket a handful of Mexican dollars.

"I wondered why he should have been so generous, when a quarter of this would have paid me amply. '*Caramba!* it is some affair of gallantry!' I said. And I watched him. Lo! after all were gone to the fandango, he creeps forth. I follow him! You attend me, comrade?"

"With all ears?"

"I follow him. He hangs the ladder on the hacienda wall; and in a moment he has *Donna Pipa* in his arms!"

"Death of my soul!"

"So I, in the surprise of the moment. I had looked for the niece; but the wife!—*carajo!* And he is upon me! I thought he would slay me; but doubtless he feared the outcry. He was content to swear me to secrecy. And you hear me, comrade? It was he who insisted on my dancing with *Donna Pipa*—I who would not have so presumed—that I might thus ever fear to betray him to Don Roberto, lest he should visit his wrath on me for such familiarity with his wife! *Ay Dios!* has he not the subtlety of Satan? I am thus tied hand and foot. In his impatience, would Don Roberto stop to consider my constraint?"

Eustaquio could only exclaim at the high-handed insolence of the overseer.

"And look you," pursued Concho, losing sight of no point that would strengthen his case, did not he attempt my life on my return from the fandango? In the interests of our good master, and that he might no longer be shamed, I flew to remove the ladder, that the infamous ones might be discovered, and yet be unable to lay it to my charge. But he was beforehand with me. To waylay my path, to make a cast at my horse's foot—*caramba!* such is the work of this devil!"

Eustaquio expressed his sympathy.

"Let us take time for reflection," he suggested, of course with the purpose of communicating with Gopher Charley.

But that enterprising cowboy was now ready to take matters into his own hands.

"That is a very pretty story, my children," he said, revealing himself.

Concho jumped as if shot. The shock sobered him.

"My God!" he cried, and stood aghast.

"I'll trouble you to repeat that to the boss," said Charley. "I reckon it'll lift the gay and festive overseer clean out of his boots!"

"Don Roberto will slay me!" cried Concho, thoroughly frightened when he found himself irrevocably committed to the story he had concocted.

This revenge was a delicious thing to brood over; but when it came to action, then he must consider the danger to himself. If he failed to win the credence of Demon Dukes against the testimony of Black-Hoss Ben and Pipa, he might expect no mercy. If, having gained this point, Dukes failed to kill Black-Hoss Ben, he might look for a settlement with him!

His only hope was that their evidently interested motives might throw their testimony into discredit, and that Demon Dukes's violent temper might fall with annihilating force upon both of the culprits. He would be lucky if it did not include him as well!

In the ultimate fate of the shivering coward before him, Gopher Charley felt no concern whatever. What he wanted was to see the fun when Black-Hoss Ben should lock horns with Demon Dukes.

The ranchero and his hopeful son were in consultation over the ill-success of their first plot.

"There's no use talking," said Jack; "we've got to shunt this overseer off the track. And mark my words—if we don't bury him, he'll make us trouble."

"But on what excuse?"

"We can trump up one easily enough. He's touchy; we can fire him off, and then sit down on him."

"It'll be like sitting down on a hornet's nest, I predict!" laughed Dukes.

"I have just seen Gopher Charley," pursued his son, "and learned that, instead of going to see a lady, he has been training a horse—the same that Beatrice rode when he returned with her from our fiasco. Do you know what that means? He has been training it for her especial use, and has made her a present of it. Which signifies?—but one possible thing. He's got his eye on the identical little pile that we are after!"

Demon Dukes uttered a savage oath.

"We'll block his little speculation," he said. "I'll have the rascal cowed for his impudence!"

"My idea exactly. By the way, he was about to treat one of my men to a like favor, but refrained for some reason of his own, only intimating that he would have served his master similarly if the chance had been given him. I fancy that a little of his own sauce would be very appropriate."

Demon Dukes, whose rage increased the more he thought of the possible peril to the fortune he was after, was for putting their scheme of punishment into instant execution.

This exactly suited Yellow Jack, who in his assault upon so formidable an antagonist as Black-Hoss Ben was glad to find an ally in his father.

But at this point Gopher Charley made his appearance.

Yellow Jack enlisted his services at once, telling him of their project.

"Hold on, gentlemen," he said, coolly. "It's my candid opinion that you are going off half-cocked."

"Explain yourself," said Dukes, frowning with displeasure.

He did not like the off-hand half-insolence of this free-spoken cowboy.

"You think that your overseer is bidding for your niece—that he has gone a boss as a starter?"

"Well?"

"You will excuse me if I say that I think that it is a blind, unless he's got the gall to try to knock you out of both queens in one hand!"

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded Dukes, peremptorily.

Gopher Charley took the matter quite coolly.

"You haven't pulled the queen of trumps yet—the litle of the fandango," he said.

"No."

"For the reason that she has been up your sleeve all the time, my dear sir!"

"What are you trying to get through you?" cried Dukes, out of patience with this round-about way of putting matters.

"Have you found her?" asked Jack, eagerly.

"Bet yer life, boss!" was Gopher Charley's emphatic assurance.

"Who is she? Where is she?" were Yellow Jack's headlong questions.

He was ready to let Black-Hoss Ben and Beatrice's fortune rest for a while, until he had appeased the burning curiosity that had consumed him since the night of the fandango.

"Keep cool!" recommended Gopher Charley, laughing in anticipation of the change that would take place in both his auditors when he made his revelation.

Demon Dukes was now frowning with impatience. He had no interest in the mysterious mask. But soon he would change places with his son; he would be raging, while, as like as not, Jack would only laugh at his discomfiture.

"There will be plenty of time to make her acquaintance at your leisure," said the cowboy. "She is an inmate of your house."

"Cousin Beatrice!" exclaimed Yellow Jack, with a savage frown.

Gopher Charley laughed again.

"You must have been drunk—stone drunk!" he said. "Why, the belle wasn't half her size."

"Come, come!" said Dukes, impatiently, "let's have done with this! If you have anything to say, say it!"

"It will come time enough for you, sir," said Gopher Charley, carelessly.

He liked to show both father and son that he was no Greaser to cringe before them.

"Could it have been one of our hussies?" asked Jack, with ludicrous expression of chagrin.

"It was your respected mother-in-law!"

Yellow Jack started, letting his jaw drop in his amazement.

Demon Dukes slowly rose from his chair.

"What did I understand you to say?" he asked, in a low, constrained voice.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BLACK HOSS BEN AT THE STAKE.

FEW men could have met his eye at that moment without quailing.

Gopher Charley felt a cold tide set toward his heart, in spite of his preparation for some terrible outburst on the part of the injured husband. Violence may be met and turned aside; but this pent-up fury—one can never tell when or where it is going to break out.

By way of precaution the cowboy let his hand fall carelessly on the butt of one of his revolvers.

"It was your favorite wife, Donna Pipa," he said, without wavering.

Dukes smiled—the smile that means murder!

"Of course you have evidence to substantiate this charge?" he said.

"I wouldn't have made it, boss, if I hadn't."

"Because," said Dukes, quietly, "if you fail to make good the accusation, it is only fair to warn you that I shall cut your heart out and throw it to the dogs!"

"That's your privilege," said Gopher Charley, with indifference.

As he had anticipated, Jack had thrown himself into a chair, and was laughing until the very room shook.

None of them heard a savage ejaculation that was uttered on the other side of the wall, in Pipa's oratorio. The lady whose discretion was in question had her dainty ear at the cranny before described, and was thus warned of the ordeal she would soon be called upon to pass through.

In her room, the woman to save whose life Black-Hoss Ben had risked his own still slept on!

Gopher Charley gave in detail his knowledge of the matter and how he had got it.

Demon Dukes listened in silence.

Watching his stony face from her place of hiding, Pipa knew that he would never forgive the trick she had played him.

The truth was that he was contrasting her actual participation in the fandango with her professed inconsolability at his absence. What rankled in his breast was the thought that, after all his experience with woman, this one had succeeded in making a complete dupe of him; for he had believed in the sincerity of her professions.

"An old dotard with a young wife!" he muttered to himself. "A cover for her amours with younger and better-favored men! This dog of a Greaser shall die, whether what he says is true or not! Why has she had him for her escort? It is a fit of jealousy that makes him betray her at last, is it?"

In that one particular his knowledge of human nature had led him aright; but he exaggerated Pipa's actual offense. Until the advent of Black-Hoss Ben she had never seen any one whom she preferred to her lord and master, who was perhaps not much worse than the medieval barons who were the heroes of the romances she loved so well.

But the jealousy of such a man as Demon Dukes once roused was not likely to stop short of the worst that he was conscious of in himself. He saw himself made a convenience of, and probably laughed at to his back for his fondness and folly by the woman who had really taken the strongest hold on his nature, such as it was.

He sent for Concho.

That worthy came shaking in his shoes, yet with such a look of virtuous resolve as he could command.

Dukes was as calm to all outward appearance as if it were only a matter of business.

That fact went far toward unnerving the va-

quero. He saw that it would not do to mince matters. He must make a strong case, whatever he did.

He repeated the story substantially as Gopher Charley had given it; then, being questioned, he made it appear that Ben and Pipa met by prearrangement during her morning rides, and conducted themselves in lover-like fashion in contempt of his presence, so long as he dared not betray them.

Such a course, it must be confessed, was characteristic of Black-Hoss Ben, if he had chanced to affect the lady; and this consistency gave Concho's story plausibility.

Dukes believed it.

He then arranged to wreak his revenge.

"Who is our most expert lasso thrower?" he asked.

"Eustaquio, by all odds," replied Jack.

"Has he nerve? I want no bungling."

"His hatred will give him nerve," said Jack, with a laugh. "I reckon he has not yet forgotten his grievance against the overseer."

Eustaquio was got and instructed in his part. He hailed an opportunity to get even with the man who had threatened to cowhide him.

A few minutes later Black-Hoss Ben was accosted by Demon Dukes as pleasantly as he ever addressed any one.

Dukes wished to consult him with reference to some of his horses.

They walked to the stables together, but had hardly passed the door when Ben saw something flash before his eyes. An instantaneous blow on the breast followed.

Like a flash he realized what had happened, and his hand fell upon his bowie; but before he could draw it, he was tripped by Dukes and thrown heavily to the ground.

The next instant he was set upon by the ranchero, his son, Jago, Concho and Eustaquio, while Gopher Charley stood off smiling sarcastically.

Ben was not surprised to find himself hampered by the noose of a lasso, so that he was delivered over helplessly into their hands.

Seeing the hopelessness of resistance, he wasted no strength in the vain struggle, but said with his wonted coolness:

"One would think, gentlemen, that half of your number could accomplish your object quite as well, and with certainly greater comfort to me."

By this time he was disarmed and securely bound.

He was then set upon a horse-block, Demon Dukes purposing to hold his court in the open space before the stables.

The next step was to bring out Pipa. Dukes went for her himself.

He found her changed from anything he had ever known of her. All her fawning manner was gone. She was hard and defiant, and watchful as a tigress.

He did not stop even to account to himself for this change. He was not curious to know how she came to be apprised of his purpose, as she seemed to be.

"Accompany me!" was his terse command.

She manifested no surprise or reluctance, but rose and followed him.

By this time it had got whispered about that something terrible was about to take place, and the various inmates of the house, as they could muster courage, went out to witness it.

Dukes neither invited nor prohibited. All of his nature seemed centered in his one purpose.

Black-Hoss Ben looked among the throng for but one face. He did not find it. Knowing not of the woman who lay sleeping yonder, he was left to account for its absence as best he might.

He then looked at Pipa. She gazed back at him with the most intense hatred he had ever seen expressed on a human countenance;—and his experience in that direction was not very limited. He had disdainfully provoked such looks from many an eye.

He guessed what was coming; only he made the mistake of supposing that it was all of Pipa's doing. He believed that her jealousy had goaded her to making a sacrifice of herself.

Dukes stayed for no prelude. He scorned to explain to his men what this unusual proceeding was all about. They would learn as matters progressed. He was holding this sort of a trial for his own satisfaction; not with any reference to them. He had brought the parties concerned face to face. He demanded of Concho to repeat his story.

The vaquero now displayed one peculiar feature of cowardice. His very fear made him bold beyond the daring of braver men. He looked Black-Hoss Ben squarely in the eye, and lied without a quaver.

When he was done, Demon Dukes called upon Pipa.

"Is this true?" he asked.

Black-Hoss Ben had looked at Concho as indifferently as if he were not concerned in the case. He now turned his eyes upon the Spanish woman with some curiosity.

Thanks to her eavesdropping she had had time to arrange her course of action. She knew

that she had nothing to hope from Demon Dukes's mercy. Then both pride and revenge prompted her to link with her fate Black-Hoss Ben, rather than Concho.

She rose, and with the air of a woman who gloried in her love, whatever the verdict of the world, said:

"It is the truth, but less than the truth! Why should I seek to hide it? Do not I love Senor Hameelton? Does not he love me? Until he came, I had never seen a man! Shall we deny our love for each other? He may be prompted to do so in the hope of saving me from your revenge. I scorn to purchase immunity at such a price. No! let the whole truth be known! If fate had vouchsafed us but four-and-twenty hours, we should have been beyond the reach of your rage! Now, do your worst! I laugh at you!—you whom I have made a fool of! Pah! these old dotards! Ha! ha! ha!"

During this tirade, Demon Dukes remained perfectly impassive.

Black-Hoss Ben looked rather amused than otherwise. The intense passion of the woman; her reckless self-abandonment, won a short admiration from him, as strength and boldness always did.

When Pipa sat down, Dukes turned coldly to his overseer, and asked:

"What have you to say to this?"

Black-Hoss Ben smiled as he answered with perfect self-possession:

"You would not expect me to contradict a lady, would you? And it would be so exceedingly ungallant in a case of this peculiar nature!"

He knew that nothing that he could say would make any difference with Dukes's purpose. The suspicions of such a man once roused, the clearest proof to the contrary would avail nothing.

So far Yellow Jack had remained passive; but his malice demanding some indulgence, he now interfered.

"You take matters quite philosophically, my Christian friend; but we have yet another count against you. It has come to my knowledge that you have been trifling with my cousin."

"You lie!" replied Black-Hoss Ben, in as calm a tone as if he were but passing the time of day.

With an oath the *mestizo* leaped to his feet and drew his pistol, but his father quietly restrained him.

"We can't afford such easy quittance," he said.

Then turning to his chief of the equerry, he went on:

"Jago, fetch two of your best whips."

"With all my heart!" responded the Mexican, eagerly.

They were brought forthwith.

"Just let me have one of them, if you please," cried Yellow Jack, with a great show of relish for its prospective use.

Demon Dukes took the other, to the evident disappointment of the master of horse. The ranchero himself seemed as emotionless as a stone.

"Tie that fellow to yonder stake," he commanded, "but in such a manner that you can strip him to the waist."

Black-Hoss Ben made no protest by word or sign; but all his iron self-command could not prevent his face from turning an ashen pallor, while his eyes burned with a deadly internal fire.

As Jago approached him, he fixed his eyes upon him with a look that daunted the Mexican.

"*Dios Santos!*" muttered the would-be executioner; "he is the devil! If he lives after this, he will be the death of each and all of us who have a hand in his humiliation!"

He stood staring as if fascinated.

"What are you waiting for?" asked Demon Dukes, and the absence of his customary oaths of impatient fury affected his hearers strangely.

Jago shrugged his shoulders, and clapped his hand on Black-Hoss Ben's shoulder firmly.

The latter did not wince, but a fine thrill went through his every nerve. Not often had a human hand been put upon his person like that.

"Come! Eustaquio! Concho!" called Jago. "Why do you hesitate? Are you such cowards that you dare not touch a man bound hand and foot?"

Thus adjured, Eustaquio came forward, quailing under Black-Hoss Ben's eye; but Concho, the real coward, assumed an air of insolent braggadocio.

"*Por Dios!*" he cried, laughing in Ben's face, "we are to have rare sport, it seems! Thou hast my sympathy, friend, if that will do thee any good!"

Black-Hoss Ben was carried to the stake and bound about the waist and legs so that resistance was impossible. Then his hands were released, and at Demon Dukes's command his clothing removed to the waist.

At this sight Pipa rose to her feet, trembling in every nerve. There was a fierce struggle between her love and her hate in which hate won; and sitting down again and covering her

face with her hands, she resigned Black-Hoss Ben to his fate.

"And now, how many shall it be?" cried Yellow Jack, flourishing his whip above his head and cracking it so that it rung like a pistol-shot.

"A hundred!" answered the father, grimly.

"Make it a hundred a piece!" cried Jack; "and let me have the first crack at that fair white back! By the gods! it is a beautiful mark!"

But at this moment all were startled by a shrill scream.

"Stop! You shall not touch him with your infamous whip!"

And with the spring of a tigress Pipa leaped between the lash and its victim.

In the last moment love had triumphed; and plucking her dagger from her bosom, she directed its envenomed point against Yellow Jack's heart.

Knowing well his danger, the *mestizo* leaped back with a cry of horror, tripped and fell upon his back.

In a flash she was upon him, clutching his hair to hold him down, and poising the murderous stiletto directly over his breast.

"Move but a muscle," she cried, "and I will drive this to the hilt into your base heart!"

Lying helpless, he gazed into her blazing eyes, and was so held like one under the spell of fascination.

On every side the hoarse cries of men blended with the shrill screams of women, among whom only the first Mrs. Dukes stood, to all outward seeming as unmoved as a stone.

Demon Dukes was more deeply moved than any one. Anticipating a rush to Jack's assistance, which he knew would prove fatal, he threw out his arms, waving the excited crowd back.

"Off! off, you vipers!" he shouted. "Let no one dare to advance a step!"

Then turning to his son, he cried:—

"For God's sake, Jack, don't move! A scratch with that accursed thing is certain death! It is poisoned with a venom for which there is no antidote!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FREE.

In the terror of the moment Demon Dukes had betrayed his weakness. How vain to hope to gain the advantage lost.

He might have frowned upon the woman as if the icy barrier that had thus far prisoned his passions now broken up, he was about to overwhelm her with a flood of wrath; but she faced him undauntedly.

"You shall not put this ignominy upon him!" she repeated—"no, never while I live to defend him!"

Demon Dukes stamped his foot with a frown that made all who saw it tremble—all but the woman whom he had fondly imagined was the slave of his veriest whim.

"Get up, I command you!" he cried, in a husky voice.

She laughed at him shrilly.

"Oh, no!" she retorted—"not while I hold beneath the point of my dagger the one soft spot in your iron heart!"

With a savage oath Dukes took a step toward her, as if to pluck her up like a weed that offended him.

"Do not dare to approach me!" she warned, "or by the Blessed Mother I will send this blade to the black heart of your villainous son!"

And her eyes blazed with such deadly resolve that the father shrunk back dismayed.

Had it been himself, he would doubtless have sprung upon her, sweeping her from his path or perishing by her hand. But his son! Ah! there, as she knew so well, was the one remnant of humanity in his adamant nature—the one spot of quick flesh where all else had been seared by the fires of hellish passions. That tie was a shred of heavenly gossamer chaining a demon of malignity.

The father quailed at the thought of his son's violent death, though, had the tables been turned, it is doubtful whether Yellow Jack would have returned the compliment.

Then took place a terrific struggle between this strangely surviving spark of tenderness and the Satanic pride of the man whose will had no longer been the law of all that surrounded him.

He stood glaring at the woman who dared to brave him, while his face turned purple, and the veins swelled into knots on his forehead. His laboring breast pumped the breath through his quivering nostrils with an audible rasping sound. His hands worked nervously, as if they longed to clutch her throat and crush its slender column in their iron grip.

Could he give up his revenge? Could he sacrifice his son? Could he bend to the woman who had wronged him?

"Pipa," he cried, in quivering tones, "dare you strike me here—me who have never done you aught but kindness?"

"Bah!" scoffed the woman. "What did Demon Dukes ever that was not first for his own gratification? Had I been ugly, would you not

have let me starve at your door? Look at yonder stock of womanhood—the work of your tender mercies!"

And again she laughed with fierce scorn, as if enraged at herself for having ever ministered to this man's selfishness.

Dukes seemed impervious to this taunt, doubly bitter coming from the source it did; nor did the woman whose life he had wrecked seem to heed it, as she gazed with dull eyes on the scene that moved all others to the depths of their natures.

"Such as you are, I have loved you," he said.

But the woman interrupted him impatiently.

"Enough! I hate you! I have always despised you, while I duped you for my own ends. Your old-man's fondling has been loathsome to me. Ah! Mother of God! how I have longed for the coming of some hero with the blood and fire of manhood to sway my nature as was meet! Was I never to have recompense for pandering to the imbecilities and brutalities of a wretch who was hateful to me?"

All this was insincere. The demoniacal dominion of Dukes over every one and everything that came in his way had fascinated her, up to the time when she had learned of Black-Hoss Ben's conquest over not only Dukes but his formidable hounds, followed by his terrible overthrow of Yellow Jack, and that mad ride on his peerless steed, the mere recollection of which made her heart leap and her breath come quick. But with a woman's unsparing hand she was lashing the man she had wronged, because he never so evil himself.

In this luxury of gratified malice she came near forgetting the primary business on her hands. She looked away to enjoy the fierce spasm which told that she had struck home in Demon Dukes' breast; and that single glance nearly cost her the advantage she held.

She felt a quick motion on the part of the man she held at the mercy of her dagger.

Yellow Jack had got his hand on the butt of his revolver!

But this availed him nothing. Her eye flashed back to his with such a serpent glitter that he was fain to snatch his hand from its dangerous position.

He thereupon tried his eloquence and subtlety.

"What are you thinking off?" he asked.

"What is this fellow to you, who has shown so marked a preference for my cousin? Have you none of the pride of your race? He has trifled with you, while keeping his eye on what he considers a far more valuable prize. If he could secure—"

But she checked his taunt with a cry of rage so intense and a glare of hatred so malignant that he thought that she was about to plunge her stiletto into his heart.

And that intervention prevented Black-Hoss Ben from getting the clew of Beatrice's prospective wealth, which would have shown him what she had to fear from her unscrupulous relatives.

Pipa now saw the danger of being drawn into a discussion; and she resolved to push matters to an issue.

"Order back all of your men but the thrice-cowardly traitor, Concho!" she commanded.

"Away with you!" shouted Demon Dukes, who trembled lest some act of indiscretion on the part of some zealous follower might move Pipa to the execution of her threat.

All but Concho drew apart.

That doughty knave, who had dared to face Black-Hoss Ben with a false accusation, now trembled with fear of what a woman's wit might invent for his punishment.

But it appeared that Pipa meditated nothing against him as yet.

"Disarm Don Juan," she said.

Concho hesitated. He reflected that Yellow Jack, not taking this office kindly might call him to account later.

"Do as you are directed!" thundered Dukes.

The vaquero lost no more time in possessing himself of Jack's weapons.

"Lay them at the foot of the stake," ordered Pipa.

It was done.

"Now cut those accursed bonds."

With the feeling that he was sealing his death-warrant, he complied.

Black-Hoss Ben was once more free.

Throughout this ordeal he had appeared the most composed man on the scene. He now smiled composedly.

"Thanks, friend!" he said to Concho, with a look that made the vaquero's blood run ice.

"One of these days I may have a chance to offer you some more tangible proof of my appreciation."

Concho was dumb.

Ben coolly and leisurely donned his clothes.

When he was fully attired, he turned to Pipa and said:

"Of course words are poor to express my indebtedness to you. I will now relieve you of your guard over that gentleman if you please."

The Spanish woman rose to her feet, but stood before him with her eyes on the ground.

She answered him not a word.

Would he remember her false testimony, or her repentance? Would he care for the love that had prompted the former as well as the latter?

Whatever may have been in his heart, his face betrayed nothing. Whether he was or was not touched by the struggle through which she had passed on his account, she could not tell.

He turned from her toward Demon Dukes and his son.

The latter had risen to his feet, and if looks could kill, would have annihilated his enemy.

Black-Hoss Ben looked at him as blandly as if he only owed him a return of civilities.

"I shall have to trouble you for my own weapons," he said, "as I prefer them to these."

"You are welcome to them," retorted Yellow Jack, sullenly. "You never had any half so good as those you are pleased to condemn."

"But association is everything, my dear fellow," replied Ben, pleasantly, "and mine have never been contaminated by such vile handling as these have had. And, by the way, you may, if you please, have my horse brought out by one of you fellows in whose trustworthiness you have confidence. Because," he went on, with the blandest smile imaginable, "I shall hold not only your messenger but yourself accountable for the treatment he receives."

He included the gaping stable-boys in his magnetic glance; and not one of them but hoped that the office would not fall to him, lest accident should cause the animal some injury for which he would be made to answer perhaps with his life.

"On second thought," Ben went on. "I will commission our friend Concho, here. I am confident that he bears no malice, and will therefore exercise all care in handling the horse."

And once more he bent upon the vaquero, whose false testimony had so nearly brought him under the lash, a smile the peculiarity of which caused his heart to quail and his blood to turn to water.

Concho went with alacrity; and certainly Black Diamond had no cause for complaint. But he exceeded his orders; for he brought forth the little buckskin mare also.

"And now, my dear sir," said Ben, turning to Demon Dukes, "as I have reason to believe that you are a dangerous man to trust with weapons, I shall request you to lay down your arms on the ground and retire from them."

There was nothing for it but obedience; and Dukes complied with such grace as he could command.

Ben then fired the revolvers of both father and son into the air, and left them, thus made useless for immediate assault, lying on the ground.

All this while a terrible conflict had been going on in his mind and heart. He had been looking in vain for the appearance of Beatrice.

He knew that she was in the house. Was she indifferent to what was going on; or, powerless to aid him, did she shrink from witnessing his humiliation? Where all others knew, was it possible that she could be ignorant of what was transpiring?

So, lover-like, he racked his brain for excuses for her which would leave him some hope that she was not indifferent. Anything but that!

But even after he had fired off the revolvers, she did not appear; so he was forced to go away in ignorance of that which meant so much to him.

But that he left her behind, he would not have gone off thus tamely. Had he been alone, he would have dared to put both Demon Dukes and his son to the lash, in the very teeth of their men.

But the time for his retaliation would come when he had her in safety. Then let the men who had dared to bare his back to the lash beware!

But just now a far subtler peril pressed upon him—a peril that strength and courage could not meet; a peril the thought of which made him quail.

His next step was one that might wreck the hope of his life!

He could not leave Pipa among these devils. Their revenge would tear her limb from limb. But if he went away without a word of explanation, what construction would be put upon his flight with her?

Beatrice knew so little of him, and that little had been so clouded with false appearances, how could he expect her to trust him where everything pointed in the very direction of her past doubts?

Had he supposed for an instant that she was in any real danger from her false relatives, he would never have left the spot without her, if he had had to fight single-handed every man on the place. But he knew nothing of Yellow Jack's proposal to her; the fact that she seemed to go about without restraint was calculated to reassure him; and though her peril of that day had given him an uneasy feeling, yet it had taken no definite shape.

So now it seemed the wisest course to look to

his own safety, and to return to his wooing with power at his back that would put him more on a footing with his foes.

Of all this nothing appeared on the surface. He went on in the course he marked out for himself with the cool nonchalance that was characteristic of him.

Turning to Pipa, he said:

"One good turn deserves another; and it would be poor requital to leave you here to be torn to pieces by these wolves. If you will honor me by intrusting yourself to my protection, I will pledge my word and life to see you to a place of safety."

Pipa started, and lifted her eyes to him.

"Ah! Mother of God!" she panted with clasped hands.

There could be no mistaking the significance of her look. She had exposed him to infamy and then saved him from it in a fierce fashion that had the situation been reversed, would have charmed her and carried her heart by storm. It was natural that she should think that this had not been without effect on him. And this was made the more easy by her vain confidence in her own powers of fascination.

Go with him! Her heart leaped at the thought! What cared she whither?

And yet she dared not spring into his arms, as her heart prompted. She waited for him to do with her as seemed to him most fit.

But one there was who heard this proposition with a rush of fury that swept every other consideration before it.

Eadure this last humiliation—to see his wife ride off with her lover under his very eyes!

With a roar of rage like that of a wild beast or a madman, Demon Dukes sprung upon her.

"Never, you infamous jade!" he yelled.

And it was plain that if he got hold of her, he would tear her with his hands, in his frenzy.

To her it seemed the supreme moment of her life, with all of hope on the one hand and all of despair on the other. A mad elation thrilled through every fiber of her being, inspiring her with more than woman's boldness, more than woman's coolness, more than woman's strength! With cat-like quickness she plucked the stiletto from her bosom, and made a pass at his breast at the instant that he seized upon her.

From his throat issued a shrill shriek of anguish, and he spun round and round until he fell to the ground, where he writhed like a snake that has been crushed beneath the heel of the destroyer.

Black-Hoss Ben, who had seen death come to man in all its forms, knew instantly what this meant. The poisoned point of her dagger had pierced his heart!

There was an instant while every one was petrified by the suddenness of the blow and its results.

Black-Hoss Ben took advantage of that instant.

With a bound he sprung upon Yellow Jack, and felled him to the ground with the butt of his revolver.

Our hero never made any miscalculation in such cases. The *mestizo* was *hors de combat* for some time to come!

Then the air was pierced by a shriek so agonized that even Black-Hoss Ben, surrounded by deadly peril as he was, paused, thrilled to the soul.

Out from the group of women that clung trembling to each other appeared a flying figure. All recognized it with astonishment. The woman of ice had suddenly burst into a flame of volcanic passion.

Over the intervening space she sped like some phantom, and cast herself upon the body of the man who had wrecked her life.

Life had robbed her of him; death gave him back!

But there was not a moment to lose. The mob of the ranchero's followers, with Gopher Charley at their head—with yells of fury and rattling pistol-shots, were following close on her heels.

With the quickness and certainty of movement that men learn only when a life may hang upon the improvement of a second, Black-Hoss Ben plucked off her feet the murderess, with her reeking weapon yet held in her hand, and swung her to the back of his horse.

"Away!" he shouted, and bounded to a seat behind her.

Then, while he bent low over her, pressing her close to the neck of his horse, they sped away like the wind, followed by a shower of bullets and equally effective execrations.

The little buckskin attended them, keeping close to Black Diamond's side.

Ah, Beatrice!

CHAPTER XXIX.

A MARBLE GRIEF.

DURING her misunderstanding with Black-Hoss Ben Beatrice had passed many sleepless nights. The awful peril through which she had just passed had still further exhausted her. And now explanation and the re-establishment of confidence had brought repose of mind. Everything favored a prolonged and refreshing sleep.

Then came Pipa; and to escape her effusive

sympathy Beatrice kept her face to the wall, promising to drink the coffee presently.

But the door had hardly closed behind the would-be murderess when she lapsed into deep and dreamless sleep.

Her discovery of the Spaniard's jealousy made Ema suspicious of Pipa's sudden change from passionate hatred to extreme solicitude. She had learned to love the *Americana*, and resolved to guard her against treachery, if any was meditated.

Pipa had scarcely disappeared within her own door when Ema slipped into Beatrice's room. The coffee at once caught her eye.

"I am in time, whether all is right or not," she said to herself; and in a twinkling she had the coffee emptied into the slop-jar and the cup returned to its place, to all appearance as if the deadly potion had been drunk.

So Beatrice had slept on, a natural sleep, until the discharge of Demon Dukes's and Yellow Jack's revolvers startled her into wakefulness. Then the strange stillness within the house, contrasting with the tumultuous murmur of voices coming from the stable-yard, filled her with vague misgivings; and hastily throwing a dressing-gown about her, she opened the door and peered out into the patio.

The house was evidently quite deserted; and impatient of delay, and yet not wishing to appear in dishabille before a lot of vaqueros and stable-boys, she ran to the house-top, arriving just in time to witness Pipa's desperate blow and her flight in Black-Hoss Ben's arms!

The violence of the tragedy dazed her; the sight of the dagger dripping human blood turned her sick and faint; but when she saw the man she—when she saw Black-Hoss Ben bear away the murderess with her heart beating against his!—then her heart contracted with a spasm that was as if it had been clutched by a mailed hand!

Staggering blindly, she groped her way back to her room.

She did not weep. There was no sense of injury—no indignant resentment. She only lay with her eyes closed, and was utterly wretched.

Pride? She was proud. But there are blows that crush pride to earth; there are times when all seems a hopeless struggle against a blind and ruthless fatality.

She would rally the moment her pain came under human eye; but now while she was alone, she attempted no disguise.

Meanwhile Gopher Charley had assumed direction of affairs, with no one to contest his claim to authority, and had called the men back from a hopeless pursuit.

Returning, they found Mrs. Dukes unconscious, lying prostrate across the inanimate body of her recreant husband.

Demon Dukes was stone dead.

By this time the women had flocked about, but seemed afraid to touch either body, until Gopher Charley commanded them sternly to lift the woman who had proven faithful unto death to the least deserving of husbands; and so she was borne into the house.

But, though she recovered consciousness, she never spoke after that, nor touched food, nor showed any sign of feeling. It seemed as if her soul were paralyzed.

She would let no one else approach the dead man. At the slightest offer of assistance her dead eyes seemed to say:

"Go! Now, at least, he is all mine! Can you not leave me with my own this brief hour?—me who have been robbed so long!"

So the tearful women shrunk away and left her with her dead.

As cold to all outward appearance as a professional layer-out of the dead she prepared him for the grave. Then she sat with folded hands beside him, perfectly oblivious to what was going on around her.

Padre Constancio went in to her, to administer the consolation of the Church.

She neither welcomed nor rejected his offices. She sat as mute as a stone, gazing at the dead face that seemed to shut out all the world else from her consciousness.

Only when he asked her to pray with him did she turn her dull eyes on him, with a look that seemed to ask:

"Can your prayers bring him back to life?"

The good man shuddered and crossed himself.

"Ah, Father!" he aspirated below his breath, "it is a lost soul!"

Then he prayed by himself, as fervently for the living as for the dead.

When he withdrew, she did not seem to notice it.

In that darkened room she sat, as mute, as motionless as the dead!

In his own room Yellow Jack lay unconscious still from Black-Hoss Ben's terrible blow.

When at last they brought him to, he lay for a time apparently gathering his scattered wits; then he asked for a report of what had happened.

They told him of his father's death. He betrayed no emotion.

They told him of Black-Hoss Ben's escape with the murderess. Then he frowned, but made no comment.

"And now if you'll clear out of here, I'll try

to get some sleep," he said, when there was nothing more to learn.

No one could guess anything of his feelings, thoughts, or purposes. When he got ready to act, he would command them.

So the wretched day waned, the women huddling together in the house, tremulous and tearful, speaking only in whispers, and starting at the slightest unexpected sound, while the men lounged about the stable-yard, with moody frowns and sullen silence.

It was not until nightfall that Ema beheld her that she had not seen, or indeed thought of, Beatrice since she left her asleep, hours before.

But the girl had not then had breakfast. Had not hunger driven her from her room? To fast twenty-fours uncomplainingly! What if another tragedy awaited discovery in that room? What if, after all, she had been too late?

Trembling with affright, she dared not go to look alone. Without saying anything about the coffee, she made inquiry about Beatrice; and as no one knew aught of her, she induced one more courageous than the rest to accompany her while she went to confirm or dissipate her fears.

They were greatly relieved to find Beatrice apparently quite well, though pale almost to ghastliness. It was natural that they should ascribe this to the horror that had appalled them all.

Ema began with profuse apologies; but Beatrice waved them aside. She dismissed the other woman, and then said to the maid, without preface or explanation:

"You have a lover by the name of Concho?"

Ema stared in astonishment, and then recovering herself, replied with a shrug:

"Such, senorita, is indeed my misfortune! And little comfort he is to me!"

In cold tones that ignored the maid's coquettish little fling, Beatrice pursued:

"Can you bring him here to me without his entrance into my room being observed?"

Ema stared harder than ever; and it was observable that her spiritual thermometer went down several degrees as she made answer:

"Undoubtedly it could be managed, with the house so in confusion that one can scarcely keep track of oneself, not to say of one's neighbors."

"I will be obliged to you if you will fetch him here."

Ema went on her mission with a very decided look on her face!

"Look you!" she said to Concho, with an uncomfortable laugh, as she told him what was wanted of him, "you are suddenly in great demand with the ladies! It seems that you are to flirt with the *Americana*, as with Donna Pipa, perforce! I pity you, my friend!"

"Don't be a fool!" replied Concho. "I suppose she looks to me to recite to her in detail all of the overseer's little gallantries. Shall you tongue-lash me for that?"

"*Santa Maria!* what is it to me?" cried Miss Ema, with a pert toss.

When she had very cleverly steered him clear of all prying eyes, and ushered him into the presence of the *Americana*, she was about to flounce out, but that Beatrice said:

"You will please remain."

Then indeed the little maid's face cleared up wonderfully, and she awaited developments with bated breath and eyes that glistened with eager curiosity.

Then between these three was framed a plot by which Beatrice was to leave the house that night under the guidance of Concho, who was to see her as far as Santa Fe. She promised him a reward that made his eyes flash with expectation of the time when he could gamble boldly, without the danger of having his money fail just as luck turned and he had a chance to break his opponent. Then too, he reflected that by getting her out of the way of Black-Hoss Ben he could retaliate upon the loss of Pipa.

Ema's motives were far simpler. The romance of the thing was what captivated her. She entered with heart and soul into her share of baffling pursuit, if any was attempted.

Then came the night; and as the darkness closed in, it seemed to the terrified women who huddled together like frightened sheep, increasing one another's fears by the narration of ghost stories and kindred horrors, that a troop of phantoms crept round and round the house, seeking some partly-drawn curtain where they might peer in on them.

They could not think, without shuddering and crossing themselves, of that strangely silent woman who sat in yonder alone with her dead. Not one had dared to approach her. They had set food and water just inside the door—which she had not touched. And now in the darkness the boldest of them was afraid to go alone out of the room where they were all assembled, lest she should encounter that soulless automaton, and be struck dead by a glance of her eye, or be turned to a living stone like her.

It was agreed that she was unquestionably a child of the devil, and that he had now entered into full possession of her. To be sure such possession was usually the fate of one inordinately wicked; and the worst that could be laid to Mrs. Duke's charge was that she held her tongue in season and out of season. But it

must be admitted that a thing so unprecedented must have an extraordinary cause; and who knew anything of her past?

When at last they went to bed, two or three together for greater security, they lay awake and trembled, or if they chanced to drop off into a doze, some awful nightmare would frighten them back to wakefulness, to start up with a scream, and imagine that that woman, dead though living, was creeping in upon them.

So Beatrice might have carried off the whole house without danger of being questioned by anybody, so long as she did not rouse Yellow Jack.

But moving as silently as a wraith she glided out into the night, and so for the time escaped, Concho having performed his part faithfully.

CHAPTER XXX.

AGAIN!

In the morning Yellow Jack rose with a dogged determination to secure Beatrice's fortune by gaining possession of the girl herself, and that too without delay.

He feared the interposition of Black-Hoss Ben; so what was to be done must be done at once.

He knew that Ben loved her, and it added not a little to his relish for the undertaking to think that he would be serving his revenge while he was gratifying his avarice.

Casting aside all thought of winning her by fair means, he turned to ruthless violence.

The one thing was to bring about a marriage that could be substantiated in a court of law. To this end he must have a priest subservient to his purpose, or make it appear that the girl was acting of her own free will.

Padre Constancio was out of the question. He was both too honest and too keen-eyed to be deceived.

"There's no use in mincing matters," said Jack to himself. "A fortune is worth less than a life—to the person most nearly concerned! She must be made to go through the service under the fear of death; and I am just the man to hold her to the rack, and to douse her glim, too, at the first sign of flinching!"

Out on the veranda he seized by the arm the first maid he came to—no less a person than the pretty gossip, Ema, who attempted to slip by him without attracting his notice.

"You are in attendance on my cousin, are you not?" he asked.

"Yes, senor," she replied, shrinking back with a look of terror.

"Go to her and say that I wish to speak with her at once."

The girl's eyes dilated and her lips fell apart, as she fairly gasped:

"Yes, senor!"

This meeting Yellow Jack's frown was a more serious business than it had seemed when her enthusiasm for Beatrice was at its height.

With an oath the *mestizo* flung her from him.

"Curse you! am I a gorgon that you turn to a shivering idiot the moment I speak to you?"

"Pardon, Excelenza!" breathed the girl, and hastened away.

He strode the length of the veranda with the restlessness of a caged beast while she was gone.

On her return she could not meet his searching eye; she could scarcely speak.

"Excelenza, Donna Beatriz has gone out. You know it is her custom."

Her voice died away into almost a whisper. She looked as if she were about to faint, and indeed she came within an ace of it, so great was her terror, now that she thought of the consequences if her deception was ever discovered.

Of course Jack knew that it had been Beatrice's habit; and he attributed the girl's extreme trepidation to her fear of him after his recent harshness with her.

Mounting his horse, he scoured the prairie for as great a distance as Beatrice could well go from the ranch, but of course failed to find her.

He returned in a mood that made his face anything but reassuring.

During his absence Ema had conjured up all sorts of horrible retaliations, until her courage failed her utterly; and when she stood again face to face with him, confession trembled on her lips.

"What is the matter with you?" he cried, in a rage at her weakness.

As if unable to speak, she cast herself at his feet with clasped hands and streaming eyes.

He seized her by the shoulder and shook her roughly.

"Speak!" he thundered. "What ails you?" "Oh! do not slay me!" wailed the terrified girl.

A foreboding of the truth shot to his heart; and waiting for no more, he threw her from him with such violence that she fell prone on the veranda floor. Then striding past, he bolted into Beatrice's room without ceremony.

His entrance was no intrusion. The room was tenantless. Everything was in perfect order. The bed had been newly dressed, or had not been slept in that night.

Swearing with a diversified eloquence nowhere attained to such perfection as in the West, he stamped out of the room again.

Ema lay where he had thrown her, either in

a swoon, or feigning one very successfully—we are inclined to think the latter!

No one could tell the enraged *mestizo* anything about Beatrice. None of the women recollected seeing her all the previous day.

"Escaped!" hissed Yellow Jack between his teeth, "and with a day's start! But she had just been rescued—by that accursed meddler! Surely I remember having been told that he returned with her. Eh! could they have arranged some plan of escape between them, so that he knew that he was not leaving her behind?"

He demanded to see the waiting-maid again; but she had recovered consciousness only to go off into violent hysterics.

Out of patience with this woman's weakness, he forced his way into her presence; but at sight of him she shrieked like a maniac, until the women prayed him in tears to leave her, lest she die outright of fear.

Well, he was a man, and even his ruthless brutality yielded to the awe with which this peculiar feminine infirmity inspires most of his sex. How the fair conspirators must laugh in their sleeves, as they watch their dupe creep away with a feeling that he is little—if any—better than a monster!

Inquiry at the stables was equally unproductive of information. No one had seen Donna Beatriz.

To call upon his most skillful trailers was the only thing left.

Eustaquio was at hand; but Concho?

That worthy had evidently made up his mind that Duke's Den was unhealthy for a man of his constitution, and, taking advantage of the general confusion, had "sloped."

That this construction of his absence at that particular time was the correct one, and that the fugitives had gone together, was made colorable by the fact that two of the best horses in Demon Duke's stables were also missing.

Swearing deadly vengeance, Yellow Jack set his vaqueros to riding in a circle of which the ranch was at the center, examining carefully every inch of ground.

They found a double trail leading from the ranch, which was pronounced to be not older than midnight; and then began that wildest of all sports—a man-hunt!

Owing to the lateness of the hour to which the women of the ranch sat up, Concho did not get started as early as he would have liked. Indeed it was within an hour or two of daylight before he got fairly under way.

He at once took to the mountains, knowing that the soft loam of the prairie would leave too plain a trail for Yellow Jack to follow, while the rockier soil and labyrinthine paths among the hills would delay, if not balk, pursuit.

But he made one fatal oversight. Though fleet on the prairie, the horse chosen for Beatrice was not used to mountain travel, and an unlucky slip strained a sinew so that their speed was materially lessened.

By nightfall they were overtaken; and gallant Concho, who was equal to almost anything save meeting Yellow Jack's wrath, abandoned his charge and incontinently took to his heels!

Beatrice was in despair; but she looked like a captive queen among her enemies.

Even Yellow Jack's sneering triumph could not daunt her. She sat in proud silence, refusing to speak to him.

His men paid her involuntary respect in their looks.

Leaving her in charge of a small guard whose faithfulness he could trust to withstand any attempt on her part to bribe them to treachery, he, with the rest of his men, set out in pursuit of Concho.

But the vaquero had looked well to his own mount; and favored by the darkness that soon set in, he eluded them, so that they were forced to turn back empty-handed.

They found their comrades camped about a fire; but Jack's eye at once sought Beatrice in vain.

Spurring his horse into their midst, he leaped to the ground and demanded with an oath:

"Where is your prisoner?"

"Allow me to answer that question," said a pleasant voice at his elbow.

The *mestizo* leaped away as he faced round.

He confronted Black-Hoss Ben!

CHAPTER XXXI.

SO NEAR, YET SO FAR!

PIPA's hopes were again revived. Once more had this man risked his life to save her from her enemies. And she had seen what no one else in that excited throng had.

Chance had directed her eyes to the roof of the ranch at the moment when Black-Hoss Ben swung her to the back of his horse; and even in that hour of deadly peril she had turned her head to cast a look of triumph into the eyes of her rival.

Beatrice had seen that look, and drank deep of its bitter significance.

Then, too, the Spanish coquette argued favorably to her hopes from the fact that, even after

he had got beyond the reach of his enemies, Black-Hoss Ben did not offer to transfer her to the back of the buckskin mare.

If he did not love her, why should he keep her in his arms?

It did not occur to her that our hero might consider it a profanation to let her ride Beatrice's horse! Such, nevertheless, was the fact.

She could not reconcile his coldness with her theory of passionate love, with any satisfaction to herself; but then he might be piqued, and, too, he was an *Americano*.

But when he neared a mining-camp where he thought it safe to leave her, he yielded Black Diamond exclusively to her use, walking beside him and holding her on, to quiet her fears.

When he took leave of her, promising to return and make provision to have her sent to her friends, wherever they might be, then she knew that she had but deluded herself from the first; Black-Hoss Ben had no love for her!

She did not protest. She was divided between a mad impulse to kill him or herself, or both.

But one glimmer of hope stayed her hand.

"When he finds her dead," she said to her heart, "he may return to me. Ah! Mother of God! it cannot be that I should love him so passionately—so that the loss of my soul were nothing, did it but purchase his love!—and yet love him in vain! Do not the dumb lips of two of my victims cry out to Heaven continually against me?"

But she addressed the solitude, and it returned no answer!

Hour after hour Black-Hoss Ben rode, taking no heed for himself, but relieving his horse by riding the little mare, until he had gone far over the mountains.

The darkness surrounded him, yet he picked his way among the frowning crags with the certainty of a man to whom the path was familiar.

Then in a wild mountain fastness he came to a narrow pass where he was suddenly challenged by a human voice.

Instead of replying in words, he made a peculiar sound.

An ejaculation of surprise and pleasure came from the darkness.

"Good Lord, Cap!—is that you?" asked a gruff voice.

Then a man leaped down into the path from some higher level, and made his way up to our hero, peering into his face as he grasped his hand with eager cordiality.

"How do you do, Tony?" was Black-Hoss Ben's familiar salute.

"Waal! waal! I'll be blowed to thunder!" exclaimed the man. "This hyar is jest good fur sore eyes!—it is, by jingo! Won't the boys shout, though! I'd give my share in the next haul, big or little, to be relieved from this hyar post fur the next hour!—sell me fur tripe ef I wouldn't! Why, Cap, we thought you'd shook us fur good!—an' hyar ye are back ag'in!"

"And in trouble, Tony."

"What?"

"I've come for help from the boys."

"Waal, jest you put this hull camp in yer breeches-pocket. An', Cap, don't furgit to give yours-truly a front seat!"

Promising compliance with the request, Black-Hoss Ben passed on.

At the further end of the pass he came to a rude encampment the brigandish character of which could not be mistaken.

Here his reception was a perfect ovation. The men crowded around him, claiming hands and ears and eyes and voice on all sides, while they made Babel with their eager salutations and questions, amid a general tossing of hats and lusty cheering.

When he told them that he had not come to stay among them their ejaculations of disappointment were mingled with cordial responses to his call for assistance. As Tony had said, he could have taken every man of them at his heels, had he wished to.

But he chose such as would serve his purpose; and when he had given his horses an hour for food and rest, they bounded into the saddle and were away.

They reached the ranch on the following day, to find it in confusion. The women were making preparations to abandon the place. Their superstitious fears of the strange woman who still kept vigil beside her dead, added to their dread of Yellow Jack when his violent nature should have not even the slight curb of his father's presence, was more than they could endure.

Black-Hoss Ben stayed only long enough to learn that Beatrice had fled and was being pursued by the *mestizo*.

Away! away over the trail he coursed, leading all the others. Nor did he draw rein until he rode into the camp of the guard that Yellow Jack had left over Beatrice, and terrified them into quiet surrender.

Then they were deprived of their arms, and told to dispose themselves about the fire as if nothing were amiss.

Beatrice's meeting with Black-Hoss Ben was an embarrassed one on both sides.

She thanked him in set, formal terms, but avoided his glance. He thought that this was

no time for explanations, surrounded as they were by strange men.

He took her apart, where she would be out of danger if there was a struggle to overcome Yellow Jack.

So the trap was set, and the *mestizo* rode into it without a shadow of suspicion.

As he swept his eyes around to face Black-Hoss Ben, he saw a circle of men rise up out of the bushes with leveled carbines.

He knew that resistance was madness; but what had he to hope from the man he had humiliated, and whom he had sought to wrong even more bitterly by robbing him of the woman he loved?

With a savage snarl he leaped upon our hero, to be met as once before, and hurled to the ground.

This time Black-Hoss Ben followed up his advantage, and bound his captive with a quickness and dexterity that showed that he was perfect master of the situation.

Yellow Jack's followers yielded without a show of resistance.

Beatrice was now brought to the fire, as the mountain air was quite chill, to wait until another could be built where she could enjoy greater privacy.

At sight of her, Yellow Jack laughed venomously.

"Well, fair cousin," he said, "you have got your lover, if you prefer *Tiger Dick* to Yellow Jack! And you, sir, stand a fair show to bag her million and a quarter, if you can induce her to overlook your little irregularities with another man's wife! Take a fool's advice. You can't eat your cake and keep it! Secure the money first, and then you can come back after the pretty little Spaniard. Ha! ha! ha! You have that advice gratis!"

But instead of attending him, Black-Hoss Ben was watching Beatrice.

He saw her start back with a shudder, gasping:

"*Tiger Dick!*"

He knew then that all was over. His past life of evil had robbed him of the one good that the world now held for him!

"Is this true?" she asked him; and the fact that she asked the question told him what he might have hoped for had he been able to say "No!"

"It is true!" he replied, in tones that did not falter, though all was growing dark about him, and sounds at hand seemed far away.

She gazed at him with her face whitening and her eyes dilating with horror; and then suddenly she turned to flee away into the darkness.

Tiger Dick, for it was indeed he, said not a word; but his head dropped upon his breast.

The men, however, whom he had summoned to his assistance, opposed her progress.

"Beg pardon, mum!" said Tony, politely but firmly; "but we can't let no one pass without the cap'n's orders."

The captain! This brought the wretched truth before her imagination more vividly than anything else could have done. The captain of a band of robbers!—men whose hands reeked with blood!

Besides, the evil fame of Tiger Dick had come to her ears in accounts of his terrible single-handed encounters.

With a shudder she shrunk from Tony, and cowered to the ground, covering her face with her hands.

Yellow Jack laughed in ghoully glee. If it cost him his life, he would enjoy this sweet revenge.

Tiger Dick walked up to him, cut his bonds, and restored his arms.

"Your horse will be returned to you, and all restraint removed from your liberty," he said; and while the *mestizo* stared, doubting if he heard and saw aright, he turned his back upon them.

Yellow Jack could now have shot him without difficulty. Perhaps Dick was quite indifferent to that fact; perhaps he knew that, with life and liberty his for the taking, the *mestizo* would deem revenge dearly bought at the expense of certain death.

In amazement Yellow Jack looked around; but when his horse was actually brought, he mounted it and rode away with an alacrity that showed he did not mean to give Black-Hoss Ben time to change his mind, and without stopping to concern himself about the fate of his followers, who were not included in his release.

His men were set at liberty in the morning; and then the way to Santa Fe, whither Black-Hoss Ben meant to convey Beatrice, was entered upon.

Beatrice, without looking into his face, did implicitly as he directed. She rode the little buckskin mare. Did it pain her to think that it was for the last time?

As they neared Santa Fe, he discharged the road-agents and entered the town in his character of Black-Hoss Ben.

"Before we part," said he, as he rode beside the girl, "let me place myself right in one particular. I want you to know that I have wronged you in nothing save silence."

Then in a few words he placed before her the motives that had governed his action wherever Pipa had been concerned.

She listened with bowed head, and made no reply. He did not seem to look for any.

So they parted, she having not spoken to him after that question, if he was indeed Tiger Dick.

At Santa Fe the delicate problem of providing for her journey eastward was solved for him by fate. She there met the executor of her uncle's estate to whom she had written.

Of course he had not received her intercepted letter. He was a boyhood friend of her father. He had been on the ocean, returning from Europe, when ruin fell upon Mr. Holyoke. The moment he arrived and learned of the calamity, he set out to follow his friend, and place his own wealth at his disposal.

So he came in the daughter's extremity when her father was beyond the reach of his generosity. All that he could do for his friend was to make arrangements to have his body transported to his distant Eastern home.

On the mound of a new-made grave in the chaparral near Duke's Den a faded woman lay prone. When they went to her, she was dead! It was Beatrice that caused her to be interred in the same grave, holding the dead woman's feelings sacred, against her own repugnance to her infamous husband.

On the wind-swept prairie, restored to her wild freedom, the little buckskin mare courses once more, knowing no rider after Beatrice.

Somewhere in the great West wanders a man with a face that seems to have caught the stony expression of Mrs. Duke's, to bear it on until his life-journey shall end like hers, in the grave! Men in whispers point him out as BLACK-HOSS BEN.

THE END.

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